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ACTION

AND OTHER STORIES

By

C. E. MONTAGUE

Created half to rise and half to fall,
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all:
Sole judge of truth in endless error hurled
The glory, jest and riddle of the world.

POPE

CHATTO AND WINDUS
LONDON

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ACTION

I

WHEN Christopher Bell was just fifty-two he woke up one September morning to feel a slight numbness all down his right side. Some of the numbness was in his right arm; a good deal of it in his right thigh, along its outside, rather less in his right foot; and just a little in his head—all over the hinterland of his right ear.

It seemed a big percentage of a man to ' go to sleep ' at one time. He lay still for a minute, to let it pass off. But it didn't. So he began to speculate. When he got up, would he be able to stand? And to walk straight? Would his head go on working all right, with that bit of it stiff? Just how hard a punch would it turn out to be, that some god or devil had given him in the night?

He tried. Yes, he could stand, walk, dress and shave. No portion of him was absolutely on strike. But the numbness went on. And somehow he couldn't feel sure that some part of the right flank of his body or brain would not give way, without notice, and give him a cropper. You never know how deliciously sure you have been of yourself, of every scrap of yourself, all the days of your health, till some small gadget inside you is put out of action: Bell made this deep reflection while going downstairs to his solitary breakfast. He kept one hand on the banisters.

II

Christopher Bell was the reigning sovereign of a respectable dynasty of ' merchant princes ' in Manchester. For several generations his clan had embraced the higher civilisation so far as English Public schools and universities lead to such

embraces. He had read with understanding and relish, and he had travelled with open eyes. He could value the great things in the arts and in science—indeed, in the whole ampler life of the race. And always, till now, his blood had pretty well bubbled with health. He had rowed, run, swum and ridden well. To his body, at forty years old, the War had brought a second boyhood of happy absorption in efforts merely physical.

Half-way through the war, the wife he had loved in every tissue of body and soul had died of something brought on by too passionate overwork for the cause. The news came to Bell in a hospital where he had just begun to grow a new skin on a face and hands well flayed and charred by chemical warfare. He could not see at the time, so a nurse read the telegram out. His face was buried deep in a canary-coloured mask of wadding stained with picric acid, so the nurse could not see how he took it—only knew that he thanked her very civilly through the little blow-hole left for his mouth. I fancy Bell was hanging on hard to the thought that he still had two children, a boy and a girl, both in their teens. Soldiers, even educated ones, are apt to grow sentimental, especially when wounded. Bell, the war widower, lay, week by week, behind his fancy-dress mask, staying his mind on an ingenuous vision of an improved world, to come after the war. He saw it as a young man and a young woman standing in summer twilight, under the stars, with their eyes all a-shine at the loveliness of the life which it had taken so much pain and shame to make possible for them.

Many soldiers hugged these quaint fancies, in their bad times. They helped, for the moment. It was afterwards that they had to be paid for. In the foul enervatory air that filled England and Europe just after the war Bell's boy and girl drifted feebly into failure. Both were married lovelessly now,

each to another small waste product of that waste-producing time. Somewhere out of Bell's sight these forfeited objects of his pride and joy were shuffling punily through life. He gathered that they were rather ashamed of him as an old slow-coach provincial.

Bell was not given to wallowing in self-pity. Still, as you see, he had had his losses, like another.

III

Your merchant prince, in these days, is prone to lose heart, get himself up as an owner of land and beeves, and melt weakly into the common herd of squires who know not, poor fellows, what it is to go on 'Change. Bell was different. He had pride. He stuck, as his father had done, to his post among the garrison of the smutty city that had done well by them. He lived where he could hear the Town Hall clock strike twelve when the traffic was quiet at night, and a North wind blowing. He liked the sound, he was so oddly civic a person.

To this old-fashioned hobby Bell added some cheap habits less rare in rich men. He stood on guard against his wealth, lest it should cut him off from the sight and sound of ordinary and unprincely men, for whom his regard had been re-doubled by four years of living with them in the war. Because of this fad he nearly always went in to the city by tram. This morning he walked the three hundred yards from his house to the tram's stopping-place with deliberate caution. He could not be sure of that sleepy right leg. He was still distrusting it temperately when he had taken his seat and was tendering his fare to town.

The conductor rejected the tender, at sight. 'We doan't taäke boottons,' he said with civil composure.

Bell examined the bright disc that he had offered as a sixpence.

Behold! a silvery trouser-button. Last night it had come off and he had slipped it into a pocket. He put his finger-tips ruefully up to his eyes. ' I'm sorry,' he said to the man, as he gave the right coin.

' It's aal reet, Sir,' the conductor said quietly. Once he saw that no pulling of legs had been intended, his tact and sympathy were perfect.

He passed on to collect other fares. But a new care remained in Bell's mind. Sight, too? Was that going? Sight, touch, the whole sensory business, losing precision, entering on the long slope to decay—the silver cord going loose and the golden bowl cracking? When a man who has known how to read feels the first clap of the hand of Time on his shoulder, he has plenty of ready prompters to ruefulness; so many excellent poets have found handsome words for the mists and mellow poignancy of man's autumn, the lapse from old vigour and vision into mere drug-takers' dreams while we are led down the avenue lined with overblown roses, to lie in the dust at its end.

Bell kept his head. But his memory was beginning to bulge with lovely quotations not conducive to high spirits—' Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang,' and all that lot.

IV

The morning's office work did him good, while it lasted. He had more than most men of the gift of forgetting himself in the excitement of getting a job to come right—any old job, the dictating of letters, anything. And just now the affairs of his firm were of quite stirring interest. Like many others it

had been making large losses for several years. Bell's game was to keep these losses as low as he could without stopping the work and wages of a moorland village-ful of people who spun and wove cotton for Bell to sell for less than it cost to make it. This unacquisitive practice brought Bell into great infamy. Most of his fellow-employers wanted to close all the factories down, or half close them down, and leave the work-people to live on their fat. So Bell was an arrant traitor to them. Still, he was an employer: and so, to ardent Socialist eyes, he was a sucker of blood, *ex officio*. This lively crossfire of censures braced Bell. If it had to be woe unto you when all men spoke well of you, it might be safer when everyone slated you hard. Anyhow it livened you up, like a good stinging wind that has blown across snow. While he schemed to find some not quite ruinous sale for the stuff that piled itself up at the mills, Bell could forget the thing that had clawed him in its clutch during the night.

But the clouds return after the rain: luncheon-time set his mind free to worry, the way your sore tongue returns and returns to the amusement of hurting itself on the sharp point of a tooth lately broken. He lunched at the club; and twice in the one hour it took him, his mind accused younger members of paying him the pestilential kind of un-arguing deference which is really the civil refusal of youth to keep its communications open with age. Could they have noticed the way he walked down the stairs—a canny way, like a horse's when it is afraid on a slippery slope? One younger man opened the door of the billiard-room for him. Damn these good manners that ain't good at all.

Going home at twilight, in the tram, Bell thought over all this so absorbedly that he kept his legs crossed the whole way. So, when he stood up, to get off, his right leg had gone clean

asleep. It was only asleep in the common and blameless way. Still, he couldn't know that, at first. For all he could tell, a second stroke might have fallen, and this time a real knock-out. Of course he kept his fears dark; still, he stepped off the car with such unconcealable care that the conductor slipped a friendly hand under his arm and led him slowly to the safety of the footpath, like a blind man or a drunk.

When Bell had walked a few yards by himself the extra numbness was gone. But the other numbness remained. And so did the feel of that patiently guarding hand under his arm. Of course he had not needed it. Still, perhaps he would, presently, 'Mene, mene, etc.'—every wall seemed to be covered with sinister shreds of writing. An object for everybody's protection, a call on everyone's forbearance—that was the kind of pest that he might become. Soon, too, perhaps. This kind of plague crept on and on. It never turned back. Five years might bring an invalid-chair and a male nurse to put him to bed and to see that he was carted securely about from place to place, to sprawl in the sun—Mentone, the Canaries, Egypt, all the places to which the *passés* butterflies of our commonwealth were brought to lie out and doze in the warmth when too much eating and idling had brought them back all the way to the status of larvae. Disgusting!

V

Bell gazed steadily into this smiling future, while eating his dinner alone. From the table he went straight, like a man who knew what he needed, to that shelf in his study on which there were all his pet Alpine books. No other sport had ever so wholly ravished his soul as mountaineering. On the high snows it seemed as if magical fires were lit in your blood; the

flame of life burned amazingly; something was added unto a man as divine as whatever it is that makes its way into the vapid juice of a fruit and turns it to wine. Nowhere else in the world was the taste of success so wholly and indefeasibly sweet as it was on the tip of some spire of granite and ice that had all but turned you back in despair by the Daphnean rigour of its resistance. There, uplifted on the swell of the round earth, you could see how men had come to dream Gardens of Eden and Ages of Gold.

He took from the shelf a great climber's narratives of his greatest adventures. Two of these, in especial, could always entrance Bell as soon as he had read a few lines: their vividness gave him an almost physical sense of what they described. Each was a case of cutting steps up a long and extremely steep slope of ice. And in each case the slope had, at one point, ceased even to slope. For just a few feet of its height it had become as vertical as the wall of a house: each man of the party had had to hold himself in to the perpendicular wall by sheer strength and good hand-hold, against gravitation.

In each case the party had come safely through. But with how big a margin of safety, as engineers say? Bell wondered. A pretty big one, he fancied. Few good climbers slipped in really difficult places; all their faculties were bent up too intently for that, with danger about; they were above their own everyday form. But what if such a party were to try paring and paring away at that pretty wide margin? Something like an experiment, that! To what untold heights of achievement might not the party attain before all the margin was gone! And of course the party might be a party of one.

Bell had once had a holiday dream of climbing a crag that grew steeper and steeper till it was vertical first, and then overhung, more and more, but still he climbed on and on

because the crag beetled out over a warm summer sea, so that, when he lost hold in the end, he would only fall from one pleasure into another, out of a mountaineer's paradise into a swimmer's. Cut out the old fear of death in that way, or some other, and—why, you could do anything.

As he sat back with the open book on his knees, a light wind stirred the trees in the garden. It may have been this that called up another old notion of his. This one had visited him in a wood close to Arras, in 1916. During some dark windless weeks of that autumn the unfallen leaves had been fading inertly from green to a dull rusty red, and so down to a dead russet brown; the whole burning heart of the year was collapsing into shabby ashes. Then a night of frost came and then a gale on a day of broken sunshine thrown wildly about between clouds. As the gale stripped the trees it had seemed almost to blow them aflame; sparks of brave yellow flew in the air; the dun beech-leaves took light and fell lustrously. Somehow the sight had filled Bell, at the time, with a wish that, when he had to go, he might do it like that—all a-stir and a-glow, by one of the ' violent ' deaths, as most of the easy ones seemed to be called. Anything but to lie on a bed in a hushed room, with the lights low and life's jolly noises shut out, and people whispering among the shadows. One wrench for the undecayed body, and then unbreakable sleep—what end could equal it?

Now, almost suddenly, these several notions ran into one, as rain-drops do on a newly wet window. Here was the moment to put into practice that old and sound choice of his between the long decrepitude of the flesh and the one clean cut and summary pang that save you it all. Suicide? Oh! no. But just to carry on, right to the end, the piquant experiment of paring and paring away that limiting and restraining

margin of safety which mountaineers, even the boldest, keep in reserve. Had not all things conspired to free him from too much love of remaining alive—bereavement and baulked hope and now this first lick of fire from heaven, soon to blast the whole of him by degrees? Why, fate had brought him the fulfilment of his old dream. No precipice in the world would now have an abhorred death waiting at its foot—merely a warm quiet sea of painless forgetfulness.

Only—he must be quick, before the accursed thing that was setting to work on him could pith so much of the vigour out of his body that he could not make his own way to a place—already he had a good place in his mind—where he might try the thing out.

VI

At the end of September a savoursome blend of jollity and melancholy pervades the little Val d'Anniviers. The summer hotels of Zinal, at the head of the valley, are closing. Down the bridle-path, through forests of fir, the hotel staffs stream along joyously, laden with the year's vintage of tips, to their snug winter homes in the Rhone Valley below. Reconverted, after four months of restraint and disguise, into young, natural Swiss men and women, they caper like Alpine cows let out in the spring. Shouting, chaffing and singing, they seem to flout with their merriment Nature's yearly menace to marmots and men. And Nature answers them back. Almost hour by hour the new snow creeps down the forested slopes of the valley and grizzles more of its firs; the morning dew lies late, and even at noon the weakening sun hangs lazily low above the main chain of the Alps. You feel, all about you, a big closing-in, the rustle of a heavy curtain falling upon a good time that is played out at last.

As Bell walked the six miles up from Vissoye to Zinal, he breasted that jovial current of waiters and chamber-maids thawed and re-humanised. Jove! they were good to see and to hear, with their jokes and catches and bold, friendly, unobsequious looks at any man and brother they met. But everything was good in this place. Even the smell of Vissoye and its pigs, as he passed, had been the smell of the best holiday of his boyhood. How he had liked life—every bit of it, coloured or plain, the high lights and the low! Even the jars had been part of the makings of the incomparable adventure. He wondered whether the mere feel of things—common things, all sorts of things—could ever have given anyone else such raptures of secret contentment as they had given to him.

He had made sure of a room at Zinal. He dined by the light of one lamp in a corner of the hotel's dining-room, now empty and shadowy. An elderly woman waited upon him; everyone else in the house had gone down the valley; she had been left for a week or two more, to cook, wait, make a bed and draw out a bill for anyone mad enough to turn up so belatedly. Bell had known her for thirty years—ever since her marriage to an old guide of his, recently killed on the Meije. She told him how their son Pierre was now a guide too, rather to her alarm. She seemed amazingly glad to see Bell, as if he were a bit of some good old world that had been slipping away. And he——? she asked. Was he making a *grande course*, as always? Surely not, at this time of year?

He fenced with her apt, friendly questions. He felt like a liar. Indeed, he was one, pretty well; for he fully meant to deceive. He would go for a walk by himself, he said, after breakfast to-morrow—perhaps to the Arpitetta Alp only, perhaps rather further.

She looked at him sadly, with peasant directness. 'All

alone now!' she said simply. 'And once it was you and Madame—and Gaspard and me. Ah! the good times.' She had all humanity's fate in her face, like an old woman drawn by Rembrandt—hopes and happy love and then the dust of the day, dimming the roses, and then great loneliness and unconsolable tears. Would Monsieur have coffee she asked.

Bell could face her no longer. It was too treacherous. No, he said, he would want nothing more. Let her go to bed early, like all the good marmots. So would he too, when he had smoked a little end of tobacco.

When she was gone, he sat by a fire of logs she had lit for him in the small smoking-room. To his surprise he found he had nothing to do. There could be no saying good-bye, no specious last letter to write, no will to be made, no manifesto of any sort to be left. People do not do such things just before unforeseen accidents—for the wood must look raw at the break. A real good tip for the widow of Gaspard would have to be left in an obvious place: that was all.

It went beyond having nothing to do. There was nothing to think. He had no fear of *post mortem* torture to busy his brain, for the God of his faith was no fiend. He was equally void of covetous hopes of a sensational 'good time' when the breath should be out of his body. So far he might have expected his mind to be free. The strange thing was to find how much of one's usual matter for thought is taken away if, in twenty hours or so, one will have nothing whatever to fix up or to see to, no house or business to run, no social beat to patrol, no arts or letters to care for, nor 'public duties' to mind. It was a release. But it was a queer one—a kind of vacuous and disquieting freedom, such as a man might attain who was suddenly let off the pressure of gravitation, so that he needn't keep his feet down to the earth any more—in fact

couldn't press on it hard if he tried, and so couldn't get any purchase for putting forth his strength upon anything at all. Bell's released mind did its best to think firmly of what he was going to do the next day. But no firmness came: the levers of thought could not find any fulcrum; they worked at a loss feebly and fumblingly.

He brought over the lamp to review the Inn's tiny library —two shelves freakishly peopled with the printed leavings of guests lettered, half-lettered, unlettered, conventional, independent and odd. There was the common aphrodisiac novel of commerce; there was *The Vicar of Wakefield*, all golden sunshine and wit; there were Nat Gould and the wise, humane book of the great William James on the incessant endeavour of men to find or to imagine some larger life on which to rest the frail and soon-tired figure of their own. Yes, that was it: something to lean against: something sure not to give when you put your whole weight on it, in any state of yourself: that was where peace and strength were to be had ; nowhere else. So he fancied, at least: he could not be sure: he was still in that vacuum where his thoughts had no pivot to work on: the wheels did not bite on the road; the cogs would not engage; he thought and he felt, but gropingly, not with the sure and eager drive of a mind and heart that have found themselves by forgetting themselves.

VII

The place that Bell had picked for his purpose was on the West side of the Schallijoch. The Schallijoch, as you may know, is a dip in the ridge that joins the Weisshorn to the Schallihorn. Even the lowest point of the dip is more than 12,000 feet high. The last part of the rise to the ridge from

the West is up one of the steepest slopes of ice that are climbed. That is if you mount it where it is least steep. At some other points it is steeper than any slope that is climbed, or thought to be climbable. The surface of this wall of ice undulates like a sheet of hammered copper—here a concave patch and there a convex one. Though the wall, at its steepest, leans back from the straight, as a whole, it has parts—the upper halves of these hollows and lower of these bulges—at which it is vertical for some feet at a time; and at two or three parts it even overhangs slightly. These last, avoided by climbers happily wedded to life, were what Bell had in mind. He would start up the wall at the steepest part he could find; as he went on, he would make, at each stage, for the point where there seemed to be most an overhang. He would do the thing honestly—try all that was in him to bring the climb off, reach the ridge and prove that, in this small matter, man could do more than he knew. With careful timing he would be up, if up at all, about dusk. In that unlikely event he would carry the test a step further and try to come down his ice ladder by feel, in the dark, instead of descending the gentle snow slopes on the Eastern side of the pass.

He worked out a time-table. Three hours' walk up to the Arpitetta Alp from Zinal. Three more up from the Alp to the foot of the final ice-wall. Half an hour for eating; another half hour for sundries and lateage. Four for the ultimate work on the wall. Eleven hours in all. To-morrow's evening dusk would be over by seven. He would push off at eight in the morning.

VIII

Probably you would have thought him rather a pleasant sight as he quitted Zinal—the outward figure of a hale, fit

mountaineer; just a little stricken with years, but vigorous; brindled but not at all bald; leanly and brownly good-looking, turning out by himself, with his axe under his arm and a little luncheon in his pocket, for a walk among the feet of sporting old friends like the Weisshorn and Rothhorn. How can you tell by the looks of a man that he would not feel the point of a pin if you ran it into his thigh, or that this exemption from pain is causing any disturbance of his spirits?

Nobody was to be seen at the emerald Alp of Arpitetta. Like the almost deserted Zinal, like yesterday's valley path streaming with walkers carrying bundles, the empty hovels on the Alp recalled the sight of a whole countryside in flight before the army of an invader. The ashes left from the cheese-maker's fire were wet with drippings from the roof; the rough wooden crane used for swinging the cauldron over the flames flapped in a draught from the door. Outside, the intoxicant beauty of gentian and orchis was over for the year; the rich grass had spread back over the trodden mud of the milking-place; but snow was lying a few hundred feet higher up. The invader was near.

Bell's legs were liking the work. The numb one was numb, but it did not give out: it would not let him down. By one o'clock he had reached the tail end—some would call it the snout—of the big Weisshorn Glacier, eaten his rations and set a first foot on the rough convex swell of honey-combed ice with water flushing out its millions of cells; for the sun was on it. He pawed the stuff tenderly with his axe. Perdition catch his soul but he did love it—strong as iron, carvable as cheese: what genius could have conceived so delicious a union of opposites if, by some disaster, no glaciers had been made?

By three o'clock he was through the freak shapes of the ice-fall, across the snowfield above it and close to the wall that he

sought. Yes, its great width and height had the wavy surface that he remembered. It showed like a vast relief map of some low rolling downland, modelled in ice and then set up to stand on its edge. Off to his right, as he looked up, the general angle was easiest. That was the regular way—very steep but quite practicable. That was of no use for his purpose. Far away to his left the slope looked ferocious enough. But down it an almost continuous fall of stones of all sizes, broken away from the sun-warmed rocks of the Weisshorn, came sliding and hissing, or bounding and smashing explosively. That was no use either. That way would be suicide, not experiment.

He soon saw what he wanted—almost directly above him. There, nearly all the way up to the ridge, the ice was steep and bare and blue, and the face of it waved more at this place than anywhere else. Several broad bosses of rocks must have underlain the smooth surface. Over these the close-fitting ice swelled like a stocking upon a bent knee. Up to the centre of each of these bosses it bulged out overhangingly; just above each centre it would recede at a more merciful angle; but nowhere in the whole thousand feet of ascent would a man have a foothold to stand on, unless he made it.

Bell conscientiously tightened each boot-lace and puttee-string. Then he set off for the point where he had descried the best overhangs. It was half-way, as he judged, to the top of the wall. If he should conquer that one, then he would look for another, more bulgy.

He cut his steps with almost fanatical care. He had a disagreeable sense of doing something furtive: he couldn't help asking himself, against his own will, ' What if somebody saw?' Damn somebody, another part of him said. Still, he cut every step as if he defied the whole solar system to say that it was not the work of a good craftsman bent upon keeping alive. So

he rose slowly. It took a good two hours' work to mount a third of the way to the ridge. But then he was close to what mattered more—the great bulge that he was making for.

The bulge stood out like a gigantic blister upon the face of the ice. It must have been forty feet in diameter and it jutted so much that a stone dropped from its outermost point would only have touched the slope again some fifty feet lower. So the climax had come. To reach that outermost point he would have to climb for about twenty feet as you climb up the under side of a ladder that leans against a wall. And he would have to make the ladder, rung by rung, as he climbed it—fashion each rung out of the ice with his axe, held in one hand, while with the other hand and both feet he clung to three of the rungs made already, and held up the body against the drag of its weight. Every rung would have to be made like a letter-box in a door, big enough for the toe of a boot to go in, but so shaped that, when a hand entered, the fingers could bend down inside and grip as you grip the top of a fence. The grand, the crucial question was how long one hand and one arm could hold the body in to the projecting ice-wall. For what part of the two hours or so that the other labouring hand might require to cut that fantastical staircase? Of course, if his axe should slip out of his hand, or if one step should break, that would end the affair. But away with the thought of any such bungling.

The moment the overhang started Bell discovered the theory of gravitation to be exceedingly true. The work was amazingly hard. When he had carved five letter-boxes, and used them, an hour had gone. He carved five more and observed that daylight was failing. Behind his back an unsensational sunset was going on at its ease. His left hand was chilled almost dead with all the ice it had gripped; his right

wrist was swollen and sore with the intensity of the axe-work; his right knee had begun to shake as uncontrollably as chattering teeth; he heard his breath as if it were somebody else's: it made a dry rustling noise, like a bird struggling silently in the hand.

The centre of the boss was now, he reckoned, some eight feet above his head. Beyond it he could see nothing as yet, but a tranquil sky with a rose-coloured flush dying out of it. Five letter-boxes more, he thought, might take him up to the nipple of this frozen breast and bring the receding slope of its upper half into his sight. It was just at this point that it struck him as a clear, sober matter of fact that he could not get up those eight feet. His strength was running out fast: one more good letter-box was all that he could conceive himself able to make. He made it, hacking away with slow, painful strokes, his axe-handle slippery with his sweat. He reached up his left hand to grab the new hold and dragged a foot up to its new place below. Then, just to go down fighting, he went through the movements of starting to chip out yet another step. Second by second the effort held out; his strokes were the taps of a child; his wrist felt like breaking; yet somehow he finished the hole and forced his left hand to rise up to it: then he even hauled up in its turn a right foot of infinite weight: the poor quivering knee had to straighten out next, and did it, after a long, doubtful struggle. But that was the end, he felt, of all possible effort.

By this time all his senses had the morbid exultation that will sometimes come of fierce physical effort. His mind was at leisure, after a fashion. He was fully aware of the sunset; he did not miss the charm of its sabbatical calm: the majesty and mystery of mountains were still there, all right. A verse he had liked as a boy came into his head, as beautiful things

that have built themselves into your mind are apt to do at a crisis—as people who once went to church will cry out 'Oh! God!' when a smash comes.

> And here indeed might death be fair
> If death be dying into air
> And souls evanished mix with the
> Illumined sky, eternal sea.

But no pretty dying for him, if death could be still headed off. He started desperately to try again, sweating and straining. No good: the feeble strokes of his axe scarcely scratched the bare ice; his left hand was frost-bitten now, past feeling anything. Only five feet to relative safety, but five more than any spur worn by his will could drive the spent body. 'I'm done,' he said, and ceased to struggle upwards.

IX

Some innate impulse to take the thing well and not let human dignity down at a pinch kept him resolved to hold on, foot and hand, to the last moment possible.

While he clung so, the sun left him. A high Alpine sunset is sudden, like tropical ones. A cold, sharp-edged shadow raced up from the valley, chasing the sunlight before it. Pursuer and fugitive scudded up over the tops of the firs and across the bright green of the Alp Bell had passed, and then up the ice-fall and on up the wall till the shadow came down like a great frigid hand on the sweaty back of his neck. Next moment the last warmth and light fleeted up out of sight, over the bulge. As his gaze followed, his cheeks felt the sting of a few falling granules of ice; little chips of it, rather; even a few rather big ones. A trickle of ice scraps seemed to be

sliding down the upper half of the bulge, to dive into space on reaching its centre—most of them clear of his back.

Queer! Was an ice avalanche coming? No need to suppose it, though. Glaciers, crushed and huddled things, always heaving and cracking, played curious tricks and ground out all sorts of freak rubbish. Oh! let the ice do what it liked, all his business with it was done; all that he could now attend to was a kind of dream noise, big, muted and almost asleep, that the torrent was making, enormously far off, down in the blackening trench of the valley—that and a kind of emotional dream of himself, the dying man doing his best to take leave as was meet—a figure at which he could look, as it were, from outside, and dreamily feel it to be rather touching.

Into this semi-dream there managed to enter, also, a sound more abrupt—a little noise like the low startled cry that some women give when they see a horse fall or a big window is smashed. The cry worked itself into his dream, but also it roused him. 'Getting light-headed,' he thought. But he wasn't. Almost as quick as that thought, a new sound, a light hissing rub, rushed down to his ears and an ice-axe slid over the bulge overhead and out into the air: it whizzed past the back of his head.

To anyone versed in high mountains an ice-axe loose and falling in any such place is a portent of horror, like a child's pony galloping riderless home or a boat adrift, bottom uppermost in a Thames lasher. It means that somebody may have just lost the power to move, without help, at a place where a man unable to move will soon be unable to live. Suddenly Bell's mind took eyes to itself; it saw a party of some sort above him, trying to cut its way down the ice wall, straight towards the deadly bulge that now beetled over himself. At this hour! And by such a route! They must be mad; so he

thought—forgetting himself. And now one of them was disabled—perhaps had disabled the whole of his party—tethered it to the ice-wall. The idea was frightful to Bell.

Another sound came. From somewhere not far overhead there broke, like an explosion, the singular cry that Swiss peasants and some mountaineers employ as a long-distance hail. No other noise of purely human production will carry so far. Harsh, wild and long, it starts, as the noise of a rocket does, at its maximum loudness, and then wails itself out in a dying fall that has an effect of collapse into despair. Though commonly uttered on quite cheerful occasions, it might be the passionate scream of some wretched animal terrified by the solitude of a desolate place and trying to empty into one impetuous lamentation all its burden of loneliness and desire.

Bell held his breath as the sinking shriek thinned away into silence. Then he counted off the seconds half-aloud, by guess work, as bomb-throwers learnt how to do in the war. The count ran to seven—eight—nine—and, just as Bell was muttering 'Ten,' the great yell smashed into the silence again. Yes: he had expected that. Someone above was in the last extremity of danger—was trying the last shift of all, the most all-but-hopeless of all—was sending out the Alpine signal of distress into this stone and snow desert where autumn and night had joined to make it utterly certain that no answer could come. It was like praying to God, for dear life, that a well of fresh water might open itself in the dry middle of the Sahara.

X

Up to that point of time, as you have seen, Bell had been the kind of dual creature that most of us are for nearly the whole of our days. Part of him had toiled, sweated and ached, and

another part of him had been sorry for that one. But, from the moment the second yell came, this twofold arrangement was somehow abolished. All craving or need for any part of himself to be troubled about any other was over; now there was nothing at all to work out any more, no next move to be consciously planned, nor hesitant will to be coaxed or hustled, nor any plaguey choice to be made. All of the man was one unit at last, and it lived intently and intensely, moved by some force which it had no more desire to question than flames have to ask 'Why burn upward?'

The next mystery was that out of the mind so suddenly lightened there seemed, as it were, to overflow lightness into Bell's body of lead. Strangely empowered, his left foot was rising already to thrust itself into the next letter-box; almost gaily his right arm, freed from its preoccupation with pain, was beginning to hack a new hand-hold above. How long it took him to make he could not have told, then or after. For time, too, was abolished; long trains of executive, practical thought could run on to their end instantaneously; courses, whole courses, of study of relevant things—of the state of the ice, minute changes of gradient, the swift re-gelation following sundown—were carried out without any sense of duration. One of the revelatory trances had come, in which even a plain man sees for once that an eternity need not be long and that in a single moment he may have everlasting life.

A minor, but still a piquant, discovery was that he had never really known till now what it was to cut a good sizable strip off that old margin of safety which he had imagined himself to have all but used up. His new letter-boxes were marvels of sketchy adequacy; they were high art in the skimpiness of the means that they took to their end; triumphs of confident 'cheek' to Nature, they bluffed that august power quite

wittily. Almost before the vocalist overhead had completed the long S.O.S. of the mountains—it takes three minutes in all—Bell had his chest up to the dead centre of the bulge and saw what he had come for.

Some thirty feet higher up, a woman in mountain kit, with no axe and no hold for hand or foot, was dangling at a long rope's end. Her body revolved a little as it hung against the steep ice, but she was making no voluntary movement. The rope constricting her chest was held with one straining hand by a man perched eighty feet higher up. He was clearly unable to move, hand or foot, without being dragged off his stance by the weight of the woman. He stood on one foot—his right: it seemed to be firmly placed, on a tiny step; and a little above his hand, he had the pick of his axe driven well into the ice. To the steel bracket thus formed by the axe-head the man was holding on stoutly with his right hand.

The sorry sight explained itself. The woman must have been cutting steps down the slope; she must have slipped from a step, and dropped her axe with the shock. The man had checked her fall well, but both were hung up as immovably as a couple of stoats nailed to a gamekeeper's door. And now the rope must be slowly killing the woman. Just as Bell's head topped the bulge she called out in a strangled voice to the man, 'Can you cut the rope, Teddy? I'm done, anyhow. Think of the kiddies. You *must*.' The man held on.

Bell gave tongue as loud as the dry brown fur lining his mouth would allow. 'Well held, Sir,' he roared. 'It's all right, I'm coming.'

Not once in a long and respectable Alpine career had Bell thought he would ever entrust his person to ledges quite so narrow as those on which he made the rest of his way up to that pendant woman. And yet he had never, in any hard

place, felt such absolute freedom from any uneasiness. As he romped up, he sang out, at intervals ' There in three minutes,' ' Just two minutes more,' ' Only one minute more,' ' Half a shake—I'm just there.' Then he arrived. He cut a big step close to where the woman's feet hung, planted his own firmly on it, and then stooping and straightening up again, took the weight of her, sitting, on his right shoulder. Lest she be fainting he put up his right hand behind her, to hold her in place.

She was no fainter, though she was white, yellow, greenish all the bad colours that beauty itself may have to put on in bad times. ' She's a good 'un,' Bell thought, as she sat quiet, panting.

' *You're* a great sportsman,' she gasped, when she had breath enough.

Feeling all the weight off the rope of a sudden, the man above shouted down thickly, ' Sure you have got her, Sir? '

' Right as rain,' she called up from her perch.

Bell added, ' Leave the rope slack, and dig in. We'll come up when you're comfy.'

The man gave a tuneless yodel of joy and was plying his axe the same instant; chips and wedges of ice came pelting down from the great step that he must be cutting, from which to make the whole caravan fast. In five minutes he ceased hacking, braced himself, drew in the slack of the rope and announced that now he could hold up a cow for a day.

Bell let the woman cannily down till her feet found a trim ledge that he had managed to scratch out while holding her up. But some four or five feet of smooth ledgeless ice intervened between this and the lowest step the woman had cut, coming down, before she slipped off. Some new ones had to be made ' Care to cut 'em? ' Bell asked. ' Or shall I? '

She ruefully opened the hands in which no axe was now held. 'I dropped it,' she said, 'like a mug. I feel sick with shame.'

'Have mine,' he said holding it out.

Her open boy face shone with joyous relief, as if at a gift of free absolution from sin. Even now their lives hung on this axe that he was entrusting to her, the convicted axe-dropper. She took it. 'You are a very generous person,' she said. 'Now I'll unrope, and go up by myself, and you shall tie on.'

He shook his head firmly. 'You mustn't unrope.'

Her eyes broke out in a quick sparkle of anger. 'You've *got* to rope up,' she said, flushing. 'I know that I've done a dud thing and can't preach. But what about you? Climbing alone! coming up out of nowhere, almost at night. Up a worse slope than this beast! Think it bears looking into? Eh? Well, do you mean to rope up, or shall both of us climb in this way that you seem to think right?'

Bell fairly funked the scrutiny of the young woman's spirited simplicity. When once simplicity sets out to inquire, what else is so penetrating? 'Well, you tie on in the middle,' he said, 'and I at the end.'

'That's fair,' she agreed. A few feet of spare rope were let down by her husband. In two or three minutes, at most, the man who would have shuffled off the mortal coil was securely girt with the most delectable of its loops, the cheerfullest symbol of human determination not to withdraw from the banquet of life—only to salt a dish now and then with a few little hazards.

XI

The last daylight was gone when the three stood safe on the level roof of the ridge, scrunching its gritty granular snow

somewhat shyly, though partly kept in countenance by the dark, which is itself a shy, friendly thing. Bell, now a mere dual creature again, had been wondering, all the way up the last flight of ice stairs, how he should give these married lovers a chance to re-assert their lately threatened right to possession of each other's lips. Best, he thought, just to turn his back on them when he got up, and try to look busy, coiling the rope.

But they also seemed to have some sort of plan. The man was waiting above the last step, to shake Bell by the hand—really to shake him—and mumbling something which Bell did not desire to make out more clearly. The cup of his consternation was filled when the lady raised his disengaged hand to her lips, a gesture for which he had not been prepared by her vivacity lower down.

Then, with one silent consent, they all stampeded away from the key of emotion. 'You travel light, Sir,' said Bell, just to say something trivial. The other two seemed to carry not so much as a prune or a biscuit between them.

'Well—' said the man, and then Bell imagined the man must be having a quiet laugh in the dark.

'Oh! I know I can't talk,' Bell admitted. 'The fact is I didn't expect to be coming right over the Pass.'

'Same here,' said the man. 'We just walked up from Randa—meant to go only as far as the hut for the Weisshorn, eat our sandwiches there and go back to dinner. Then—it *was* rather mad, but the snow was so toppingly good—we thought we might just rush the Schallijoch before dark, sleep at Zinal and come back to-morrow.'

'Gosh! it was rash!' exclaimed Bell, off his guard. He felt sure the next instant, the man was quite seeing the humour of such a rebuke from such a sinner. Hastily trying to cover

the slip, Bell made another. He asked, ' How on earth did you miss the way down? '

The man didn't exactly say, ' How did *you* miss the way up? ' but he did say, ' Yes, it was stupid, but—well you know how it isn't so easy to see a way down from above as it is from below? '

' Hadn't we better push off? ' said Bell rather hurriedly. ' We'll be getting friz, up here.' But it was not the cold that he minded. It was the heat. It felt as if he couldn't move his tongue without burning his fingers.

The three truants had luck. Just such a full moon as they needed, not having a lantern, was on the point of rising from behind the snowy mass of the Mischabel, beyond the forest glen of the Visp. The mounting light could no longer contain itself. Its bright animation was pulsing up the dark violet of the sky in tremulous waves. It would be easy, by such a light as was coming, to follow the downward track left by the couple, on their way up, almost to the door of the old Weisshorn hut, a refuge squat, squalid, flea-haunted and cramped, but divinely rich in raw materials for manufacturing heat, against a long night of hard frost.

At any time it is rather exciting to walk in the dark, and in silence, with anyone whom you like but don't yet know very well. What is he thinking about? You? And, if so, in what way? Barring you? Liking you? Wanting to throw down the conventional fence and talk frankly? An hour or two of this blindfold contact between mind and mind may so work on them both that when their eyes meet under a lamp at the end of the walk it may feel as if they had had a long and intimate conversation, leaving each of them just slightly anxious to know that the other has taken nothing amiss. Even thus, with friendly and deprecatory looks, did Bell and

the strangers regard each other by candle-light two hours later, among the strong shadows and smells of the hut.

In ten minutes more the man's wife, who had walked like a true Joan of Arc, was exercising the blessed privilege of healthy and tired young people of thirty or so. While she slept like a prosperous babe, her man and Bell smoked as they lay in the hay at the big sleeping-shelf's other end. Smoking helps to keep talk good. A man can puff at his pipe between each thing he really wants to say and the next. No gap-filling rubble is required.

Bell ascertained first that the man's name was Gollen and that he was a doctor—the Harley Street species of doctor. Bell gave in return his own name and description. Then they enjoyed one of those unembarrassing pauses. Then Bell said, somewhat brusquely, 'There's one thing we have to get straight.'

'Go it,' said Gollen.

'You seem to imagine you're under some sort of obligation to me.'

'Well, you see, we're alive. And, before you appeared, our number was up.'

'So was mine.'

'Oh! everyone's is, in a sense. "All condemned to death," doesn't somebody say, "with an indefinite reprieve." But ours wasn't indefinite. We were booked to go West in five minutes.'

'I was to do it in one. In less. I should have dropped off my holds in ten seconds if you people hadn't blown in.'

'Hullo?'

'Sure thing. I was done. I had never known until then how far doneness could go. That's how it felt, anyhow. Then your wife's axe came along. That by itself held me on for a

jiffy or two. And then you hollered—gad! you *can* holler—and everything changed. There was something new in me, or round me, at work on me somehow. Every bit of soreness and worry and funk was taken right off me—nothing was left in the world but one energy—just an enveloping, mastering sort of a push. It went up like a flame and it took me along—it made everything easy and light. And it wasn't only a thing in the mind. Old brother body himself was roped into the movement: some of the waft of this impulse seemed to get itself into my muscles. D'you follow these ravings? '

' Rather. Physicians aren't the fools that they were. We don't go on missing out what the mind—or the soul, if you like—has to say to all the dynamic affairs of the body.'

Bell puffed his pipe for a while. Then he said ' See? That's how you two preserved me. So if thanking is what we're about, thanky kindly.'

Gollen, too, smoked in silence for the next minute or two, before asking ' The ice overhung where you were when I first caterwauled? '

' Can't tell you the angle. Hadn't got a clinometer thing. Of course it wasn't a motoring road.'

Gollen laughed. Bell liked Gollen's face when he laughed, so far as it could be seen among the tangle of wry shadows thrown about the hut by a small flame that still leapt in the stove. Gollen's face made Bell think of a trade term—' good ordinary.' He had blunt goodish features, strong and good-tempered. A straight, friendly man, you would say, and easily amused; a good man to be in a hole with. Bell enjoyed such men. They made the world go round. As he was thinking so, Gollen suddenly asked, ' I say—why did you do it? '

As Bell did not answer at once, Gollen added, ' Of course,

it's cheek—asking. Tell me to go to Hell, if you like, and I'll warmly approve. Only, well—I'm a doctor.'

Bell cut the thing short. He answered at once what Gollen might go on to ask in another few minutes. 'Yes—the spring's running dry. The salt losing its savour, you know—the wine going flat. And worse coming.'

Again Gollen did the bold thing. 'Any particular evil?' he said.

Bell liked the man. And when two men would both have been dead a few hours ago if either had failed at a pinch, they may soon get on terms. Bell avowed the whole business—his symptoms, his surmises and disgusts and his specious experiment.

Gollen listened as wise doctors do. 'Did that numbness cramp you to-day?' he asked at the end.

'No. But it was there all the day—except just the time—ten minutes or so, I suppose—when——' Bell hesitated for a moment.

'When you were in action?' said Gollen.

'Action?'

'Oh! I don't mean just doing violent things out of doors—pressing triggers or lassoing cows. I mean getting every Jack fibre there is in your nature alive and utterly turned on to something outside you—absorbed in it, lost in it—every bit of your consciousness taken up into some ecstasy of endeavour that's passion and peace.'

Bell nodded, and Gollen went on. 'I guess the great artists—all sorts of 'em—know how to bring the fit on, or it comes when they're at the top of their form—they seem to get further and further above 'emselves—hold the note out in a way that we can't—bring every tissue they have in their being to bear on the effort to get a wee touch to come right. Saints,

too, I suppose—the pukka ones, like Francis, the man at Assisi: they have the knack too: they can get more alive; they've found how to exist at a sort of top pressure. I fancy all of us get just a glimpse of the thing now and then—of what living might be, you know—at a great turn in a game, or when we're in love, or if some beautiful thing in a book bowls us over. Only, we can't hold the note, or we can't do it yet: the pitch is too high for our reach; so we flop back into flatness. But we shall get there. I do believe that. What we've done since we started as jelly-fish is to get more and more of ourselves into action, and we shall go on until we are as much more in action—real true action—than now, as we are now than when we were jelly-fish. Why, in a few thousand years we may all be able to live half our time as you lived to day for ten minutes.'

'Something in that,' Bell assented.

Gollen apologised meekly. 'Sorry to verge upon "uplift". Still, one can't always bother about the convention that talk has got to be pessimist piffle.'

Bell nodded. Reigning conventions had few less dutiful followers than he.

They smoked again for a while. Presently Gollen said, 'How goes the weather?' He rose and opened the door of the hut very quietly Bell followed him out to the hut's tiny terrace.

Nothing at all was wrong with that night. Beyond the queenly white shape of Mont Rose the moon rode gloriously high, burnished and flashing with frost, above sleeping Lombardy. Gowned in new snow and bejewelled with sparkles of light, the Weisshorn, the greatest great lady in Nature, looked as lovely to Bell as when the first sight of that pale supreme grace had taken his breath away in his youth. At the height

where they stood the frost had silenced every trickle of water, leaving all space to be filled with subtler challenges to the ear. The air almost crackled with crispness: it was alive with the massed animation of millions of infinitesimal crystallisations. The Schalliberg Glacier, a little away to their right, had its own living whisper, the sum of the innumerable tiny creaks and fractures of its jostling molecules of ice. Up here, where the quiet of night was suffused with this audible stir of the forces fashioning the earth, it felt as if some murmurous joint voice of all existence were abroad and life itself were trying to make its high urgency felt.

'Pretty good!' Gollen said presently.

'Yes, it's all right,' answeréd Bell.

Gollen waited a minute or two. Then he asked, 'Is it all right—enough?'

'Oh! yes,' said Bell. 'I'm sticking on.'

A COCK AND BULL STORY

'There is a form in these things, Madam, there is a form.'
Miss Carolina Wilelmina Amelia Skeggs

I

WHEN the English and French went to war with the Germans, the enemy's armies were not the only dragons that had to be met in the path. There was that dragonesque lady, Propriety, too. For war hath her own etiquette, not less imperious than peace's. If Sir John French had sent that free-and-easy letter to Joffre, or if Haig had not paid that call upon Foch, who knows where the world might be now?

'Why,' you may say, 'do not all of us walk, all our days, along the greased pole of polite observance, trying to keep our precarious balance between right and left hand abysses of social incorrectness? Yet we survive.' Yes, but on the Western Front there was the inadjustable to adjust. Each Allied army had its own hierarchy of ranks, dear to its bosom and sacred in its eyes. And not one rank in either really corresponded to any rank in the other. You couldn't tell, within a dozen millimetres, where you were.

Four of us, English and French, lay on our tummies and talked it all out in the friendliest way between eight and nine on a baking hot morning, near a brigade headquarters in France. General Wyse, the brigade commander, was there—a delight to sympathetic eyes, he was so neatly and normally made, so clean in the tooth, so sunnily red and brown cheeked, so unwrinkled, so pleasantly sure of himself—a healthy boy forty years old and never yet worried by any serious insurrection of the world against his composure. There was also old

Gaston Leroux, a French writer—rather famous I fancy. Leroux kept on glancing at Wyse—couldn't keep his eyes off him. Leroux was in love with the type, like some American girls new to England. Leroux was a prize Anglomaniac, French people said. That was why he was now on our front, as a guest, and I was his pilot. 'Give him a jolly good show' were my orders. 'He got mobbed in Paris, about 1900, for saying we weren't such swine as they thought.' Then there was Jelf, Staff-Captain to Wyse. He was nothing to look at, and didn't say much; a man of few interests, so I had heard, beyond just winning the war.

Before us a randy gay waste of rank poppies, corn-flowers, convolvulus, thistles and relics of old peace-time mustard and wheat sloped away up to a low sky-line ridge a good mile to the East. We all looked that way as we lay, with our heads slightly raised. A dusty white road, on our right, ran due East up the slope, topped the ridge and disappeared over it. Under the ridge, on our side of it, two thick little woods stood, one on each side of the road, as if guarding it.

Just what they were doing, confound them. Wyse told Leroux: 'The Boche line is just over the ridge. Ours is three hundred yards down the slope on this side. But Fritz holds the two woods in between—sort of outposts in front of his front. The road separates the French front from the British.'

The Frenchman's eyes sparkled. 'An English sentry, then, stands on this side of the road?'

'That's right,' said Wyse.

'And a French on the other?'

'Yes.'

'It is beautiful, that,' the old boy murmured softly. He seemed fairly to doat, for a while, on the notion of those two

sentries. Then he had a good look at the two little blobs of dark woodland—almost black now with the strong sun at their backs—and at the white road running between the two as if they were gate-posts. 'My God!' he murmured. 'What a chance! What a portal, for comrades to enter!'

The emotional touch made the brigadier wince. For my own part I was used to it. Besides, you couldn't help liking that Frenchie. Somehow gush wasn't mere gush when he talked it. There was a kind of wise child's unknowingness in him, though he was seventy-two. It caused you to take from him meekly what would have made you want to lynch anyone else. Only the evening before, when I was taking him back from the front, we had met a company of the Devons marching up to relieve, and before I could check Leroux he had stood up in the car, hat off, and said, in his good English, to the whole blessed column of route: 'My dear, dear boys, how can I thank you enough?' Of course the men felt like fools. But not one of them jeered. Simply marvellous.

'Well, if that's what you're after,' said Wyse, 'you've come to the right shop to-day.'

Leroux looked as if he had only lived for this morning.

'We're just pushing off,' the general said—'my little brigade and a few French battalions commanded by Colonel Dunois. Jelf will explain.'

Jelf started instantly, the way men can when their minds are full of one thing. 'It's a minor operation,' he said to Leroux. 'Before any big push can be made, we must have the two woods—Bull Wood and Cock Wood we call them—the Gallic cock, you know, Sir, and John Bull. Neither wood can be taken alone, for the unattacked one could smash with its enfilade fire any troops attacking the other. So the movement *must* be simultaneous. Your men are to go for Cock Wood,

on their side of the road, the very second that we tackle Bull Wood, on ours. We put in four British tanks, two for our wood and two to help you with yours.'

Leroux grabbed out his watch and asked eagerly: 'And you start—we both start—at——?'

'At 8.55 the tanks cross our front line,' Jelf explained. 'Yours too. Of course the tanks start behind scratch, so the infantry wait till they're up, give 'em twenty more seconds, and then join the dance.'

Leroux looked at his watch. 'Then, in twenty-five minutes from now——'

'And a quarter,' said Jelf.

Wyse seemed to feel he must bate, for a guest's tender ear, the sharp edge of the worthy Jelf's pedantic precision. 'You see,' he said, 'Monsieur Leroux, we soldiers have to be a bit fussy about the old minutes and seconds. If only you knew all the head-work that goes to a push. Golly! the programme I've sent round to Colonel Dunois—details of objectives, pace of all movements, right time by my watch, to a tick, and lots more. Dunois must be thanking his gods that all this coolie-work falls on me. I'm a demi-semi sort of a General body, you see, and so I call the tune, though I haven't a doubt in the world that Dunois's ten times the man that I am.'

'You're a man of heart, Sir,' said Leroux. 'Ah, the change since the tragic first months of the war! We can talk of them now, you and I, as of Jeanne d'Arc and Calais—of all the "old unhappy far-off things" that sundered us once.'

'People stood on their dignity, did they?' said Wyse, interested.

Leroux sighed. 'The stickling for "rights" that there was! The mountaineering on molehills!' Really his English was topping.

'Anyone's fault in particular?' Wyse spoke rather guardedly.

'We French were the worse of the two. It is so, is it not, as soon as a tiff between brothers is over. Each can see then that he was the worse of the two. Besides, we were excited, we French—we had so longed for the good Papa Joffre to command!'

'He being,' said Wyse, 'at the time, a ——?'

Leroux said almost eagerly 'Merely General of Division, no more. And French a Field-Marshal.'

'Bit of a snag for you—eh?' said Wyse, smiling 'Field-Marshal's a bad card to beat.'

'Oh but unbeatable' said Leroux. 'And yet people argued. Joffre, some said, was really a Marshal of France, in the sight of the good God, only we hadn't dared call anyone Marshal, out loud, since the Empire, lest he turn Caesar. Rights! Rights! As if one's rights mattered, with the sky falling!'

'Well, thanks be,' said Wyse, 'it's well over now, as you say, and we can talk freely. French, you see, held the big trump. Of course our army was pottily small. And French was no good at the job. But, frankly, with that rank of his he ought to have run the whole show. It's as well that he didn't, or we'd have been pushed off the cliffs at Boulogne. Still, he ought to have, strictly.'

'Tanks are off, Sir,' said Jelf. He had not unglued his eyes once from his field-glasses during this exciting conversation.

II

Wyse paused. Four seemingly commonplace patches of that flowery wilderness had begun to shake themselves free of their holiday colours, come out as queerly-shaped dun

slugs and crawl away into the East. At the same time the woodpecker tapping of many machine-guns, before and behind and beside us, had started. Jelf expounded—we were putting down a machine-gun barrage on the ridge, to make enemy reinforcements unhappy. Nothing more. No artillery this journey.

Tanks crawled slowly in those days. A quarter of an hour, good, would elapse before our infantry moved. So Wyse could go on. And, with no guns at work, we could hear him. ' It never would do,' he resumed, ' to have anyone's standing left vague in an army, or in two armies acting together. To do his best, a man must know what rung he stands on. Some people think of ranks in an army as just a few level terraces—all the privates on one, all the captains another—so on. It isn't like that. It can't be. It has to be all single file, up one ladder, right from your last man enlisted to-day up to your senior Field-Marshal. Else, what will happen? A last stand, perhaps, and everyone dead but three privates, and none of 'em knowing which ought to take charge. Absolute chaos! '

Wyse spoke with spirit, the matter coming close to his heart. Jelf, I'm afraid, didn't listen. Leroux obviously tried both to see the march of events and to hear the wisdom of Wyse. I tried to see the events and to look as if I were only listening to Wyse. The tanks were winding deviously up the many-coloured slant. Two had crossed the road and were coiling up to Cock Wood. They were so slug-like that I found myself fearing the white dust of the road might dry their bellies fatally, like those of worms caught by the sun when crossing dry gravel. They got across, though. They still had a short way to go before crossing our line, so the brigadier had time yet to curl a good tail to his argument. All this punctilio about a man's rank was not, he told us,

mere swank. It was professional conduct. He quoted Shakespeare about it—'Othello,' I think—how 'the great wars make ambition virtue.' Very apt, I thought with the disengaged half of my mind.

Wyse fully admitted it took a man trouble to practise this virtue. 'The letter-writing is the very deuce,' he said, 'to get right—when to begin "Mon Général," and when "Cher Général," and when just "Général." Your language, Monsieur Leroux, is so frightfully expressive.'

Leroux said gently: 'There is a refuge in trouble—the method of Joffre.'

Wyse perked up. 'Eh?' he asked eagerly. He had an honest desire, I'm sure, to quit himself well in these high matters, and therefore to learn all he could.

'You have heard,' asked Leroux, 'of General Galliéni? He is a "grand old man," as you would say, of our army. Years ago some bad French politicians wished Galliéni were dead. So they cast him away on an island, like Prospero, Robinson Crusoe and other respectable persons. The island was Madagascar. He was to be Governor—as a post of disablement—merely civilian. Then even worse happened. There came a native revolt in the island. Fighting to do, but none for poor Galliéni, because his post was civilian. He is one of my friends and he wrote to me sadly. Paris, he wrote, had sent out some Colonel of whom Galliéni never had heard, to command the French troops in the field. "The name," he wrote, "of this wretch is Joffre." And then comes 1914 and Galliéni is Military Governor of Paris, but Joffre is Commander-in-Chief. And Joffre has letters of duty to write, to the senior whom fate has now made his junior. Will he begin them just "Général"? That were to say "See my fine fellow, how I have passed over your head!" Or

" Mon Général "? That were to abdicate his own rank. No, he begins " Mon cher camarade," and Galliéni is touched and no porcelain is broken.'

Wyse was obviously struck with the subtlety of this expedient. ' Bit of a brain-wave,' he said. He could not quite stomach the 'camarade' business. Too French, you know—the sloppy emotional touch. Still, he was struck. ' We can't all be so gifted,' he said. ' " Don't write at all," is my notion, " when you're in doubt. Send word of mouth by an officer." Hullo, Le Bon,' he broke off. ' Glad to see you.'

Captain Le Bon, the French Intelligence man who went to and fro between Wyse and Dunois, had really been with us for a full minute, though Wyse had not noticed, being too busy.

' Wasn't that, Sir,' said Captain Le Bon, ' the notion of Field-Marshal French, for controlling our poor Lanrezac? ' Le Bon's tones and manners were all of the best quality velvet. As soon as you heard him you asked yourself ' When are the claws coming out? '

' Oh, that was a common old cat-and-dog case,' said Wyse lightly. ' Their neck hairs went bristly at sight.'

' God will, no doubt, allow due weight to that,' said Le Bon.

I felt the air was tingling with things left unsaid. What would come next? But Jelf interrupted. ' Things going on, Sir,' he said '—on the ridge, right of road.'

We looked at the place indicated. All the tanks, much shot at but not knocked out, had gained the edges of the two woods and vanished into their green gloom. From Bull Wood there came no sign that its garrison cared. But in Cock Wood the two British tanks seemed at once to have pulled out a plug like the one that drains a wash-basin. Out of one of the wood's far

corners, the one near the road, German soldiers were pouring —streaming away obliquely over the ridge. Many carried machine-guns in bits. As each retreating man gained the crest of the ridge he looked big against the clear sky for an instant; then he seemed to dive headlong into the relative safety beyond. Tanks often had a rich moral influence in those days of their youth, but this stampede was a marvel.

Wyse turned to Le Bon. 'There's your wood swept and garnished.' In his elation the General used a gesture of offhand munificence.

Old Leroux's heart, you could see, was ringing joy-bells and singing Te Deums. Jelf was chuckling to himself. Le Bon's was the only blank face. 'My God!' he exclaimed, to himself more than us, 'If our men were there now!'

Wyse let his glass drop, and stared round. 'Not there!' he said harshly.

Le Bon stiffened at once. 'I came to convey, Sir,' he said, 'the answer of Colonel Dunois to your last verbal message——'

Wyse snapped out 'Why didn't you, then!'

'The great interest, Sir, of what you were then busy in saying forbade interruption. Colonel Dunois would be glad to hear when you have taken Bull Wood. Cock Wood will then be attacked by French troops.'

The anger of Wyse made his agreeable face the whitest I ever saw on a British General. 'He let my men go in alone!' he said with a kind of savage super-restraint. 'He has left our tanks unsupported!'

A horrible silence followed. I liked it none the better because the two tanks in Cock Wood had just fallen silent, as if their astonishing victory had killed them. Jelf I suppose, had some characteristic impulse to get people back from passion

to business. Could Colonel Dunois, he asked of Le Bon, have misunderstood the General's instructions?

Le Bon made a gesture of what I can only call argumentative despair. Could nothing ever make its way into these islanders' brains? I think he meant that. In rapid French he entreated Leroux to help the General to understand that French regimental Colonels did not receive 'instructions' from foreign commanders, however described, of smaller bodies of troops.

But Leroux broke out in a distress of his own. 'Gentlemen, gentlemen,' he cried in English, 'we wait, we talk, we think of precedence, and all the time the British tank men are alone in the wood.' He looked from one angry face to the other, as if he were begging hard for alms. But Wyse had all he could do to keep his mouth shut as tight as Le Bon's, and Le Bon was about as dead white with fury as Wyse. I understood. French officers hated and scorned our habit of playing the fool with badges of rank—making men Colonels for writing in arm-chairs at home and nick-naming them Brigadier-Generals if they commanded three scratch battalions. And now France was asked to play second fiddle in order to keep up one of these shams. They were long-dammed-up waters of rage that the unwitting Wyse had let loose.

III

While Leroux wrung his impotent hands, affairs in the East were not so kind as to pause. On Cock Wood, it is true, absolute stillness had settled. It had the queerest air of sinister innocence. Quite a good patch of sea may have that nasty appearance when you have just seen a coffin dumped into it. But Bull Wood was quite another affair; no sort of innocence

there, just a straight, pandemonic set-to. We could not actually see our infantry having it out with the Germans: the leaves hid the hand-to-hand business: but all the wood smoked to heaven like one burning bush. No one outside could tell who was where by this time; so our own guns kept quiet, lest they should hit our own men; but the enemy gunners seemed to feel that it was more to the purpose to try to hit Tommy than not to risk hitting Fritz; so they peppered the whole wood as though with a castor.

'More to come, too,' grunted Jelf. 'They haven't yet switched on to Bull the guns they had trained on Cock'; and, sure enough, the next minute a double aspersion of shells of all sizes banged down on Bull Wood like a curse.

Leroux must have thought that no living thing could go on living for many minutes under that pelting. 'My General, will you permit me,' he pleaded to Wyse, 'to hasten to Colonel Dunois—to tell him. He need only know the bare fact—your men's danger—to rush to their aid.'

But there I came in, with my little P's and my little Q's to be minded. G.H.Q.'s commands were explicit. No visitor in my charge was, on any pretext, either to put a foot over the edge of the British war zone or to do anything within it, but look on. So nothing happened. Leroux went on wringing his hands. That I was free to permit. Wyse, with a gesture, washed his hands clean of self-blame. For twenty full minutes, since the Entente had first creaked, we lay doing nothing and suffering much. No slow death for me: I tried one that morning.

Then the leaning pillar of smoke and dust over Bull Wood thinned out a little, the run of detonations of all sorts slowed down to a fairly lively allegro, and lo! released like a pent cry, an exultant rocket, all pale in the sun, rushed up from the tops

of the trees, paused in the clear air above and shook out its handful of stars to float like some bejewelled benediction over the men who had fought down the enemy while their betters squabbled with friends.

'Got it,' Jelf breathed.

Leroux's face was astream with positive tears. 'The good men! The good common men!' he kept on repeating.

'We'll never hold it, though,' said Jelf to Wyse, 'if the French give old Fritz time to come back to Cock and enfilade Bull. Could we prod 'em a bit, Sir?'

It cost Wyse a manifest pang to have any communication again with Dunois the untouchable. Still duty was duty. 'Bull Wood,' he said to Le Bon, 'is now in my hands—will you have the goodness to tell Colonel Dunois.' I suppose he couldn't help adding, in his elation and his resentment, 'Cock Wood to let, with vacant possession—apply to our caretakers on the premises.'

Le Bon glared, but it's fair to say he went off like a stag. He knew what was what, without any taunting from Wyse—that Cock Wood was anyone's for a few minutes more, Germany's or France's, whichever chose to walk in first—and also that Bull Wood must go with Cock Wood in the end. It was one of those races, pretty common in war, that may start before either competitor knows that he has to run for it.

After our happy thrill we returned to hungry expectancy. Cock Wood was dreadfully quiet. There the unbefriended state of our two tanks had turned their raid into the wildest of bluffs: why were they not coming back while they could—that or raising a deuce of a racket to keep up the bluff, lest Fritz come to his senses and call it. Was their forlorn foray ended already?

'We're done, Sir,' Jelf said suddenly. 'Same place; ridge; right of road.'

We looked: what we saw was a sudden enlivenment of the sky-line. Scores of figures swarmed black upon the ridge again, each of them a sharp dark silhouette for an instant, then a dim shape moving on a dark background. Many carried machine-guns in parts. All hurried down obliquely towards the north-east corner of Cock Wood. It was just the old stream of traffic, only reversed. By what had before served it as a waste-pipe, the wood was re-filling with enemies.

'We'll get Hell, neat,' said Jelf, 'on that right flank, unless the French play up.'

Wyse was restlessly cursing: 'Oh, damn them!' 'God blast them!' 'Hell take them!' But over the place, west of Cock Wood, where the French front line ran invisible, there was no stir but a quiet heat haze winking lazily; not a sign of life; it was as if the war were long over and all these war deserts left to themselves, to muse in the sun.

But Fritz used his time. Cock Wood may have taken twelve minutes or so to re-fill. But when it did open its enfilading fire on Bull Wood, across the white road, the whole of that edge of Cock Wood spat like one cat. You could see all along it the shiver of leaves as the breath from the machine-guns' muzzles blew them. To back up this bespatterment there came the most copious consputation of the day from the enemy's artillery of all sizes. From near and far out, on his right and left flanks, high explosive, gas and shrapnel shells converged on little Bull Wood as the sticks of an open fan run in on the handle. More than ever the wood seemed to be burning alive at a stake; it stood in a top-heavy pillar of smoke, with bleared splashes of flame showing dully through the reek and the verdure. A light easterly air had got up; it

brought us the heliotrope scent of German tear gas and a whiff of the smell of butchers' shops in hot weather—the war had vulgarised this stink.

Wyse snuffed it up and groaned 'God!—will that slug never start?'

'I know the lingo a bit, Sir,' said Jelf. 'Shall I go across and suck up to Dunois?'

'Squeal for help to that stoat?' muttered Wyse, with disdain. I suppose he had not had enough yet of that meaty aroma.

So Jelf did not go. But next moment brought Wyse an apparition, a little of which can go a long way. We all saw it. Out of the edge of Bull Wood, on our side of it, two or three men emerged running like little boys chased from a field by a farmer; then more and more, in no sort of order—a whole mob running like hares; then the wood itself seemed to take sides against them, as though kicking them out; it fired into their backs as they ran; a lot of them rolled over. Besides, there were details that you might dislike. Wyse did. They broke him. These men were his men. Brigadier as he was now, he had been a colonel, and colonels are fathers; and twenty minutes ago these men had been heroes, in whom an unbearable fate that was no fault of theirs was now quelling the manhood. 'Run like the Devil,' he shouted to Jelf. 'Say any damn thing to Dunois. Lick his boots if you like.' Jelf was up like a shot. But he had not to go. Le Bon was back, out of breath, his face full of solicitude. His Colonel's compliments, he said, and the French were advancing.

We saw them now. No trench of theirs was in sight, as you know; poppies and yellow weeds hid it. But out of these a line of living blue had arisen and was rushing through the shimmering haze of heat and light—an amazing projection of

man's vehemence across the opiate drowsing of Nature. Not for a moment did they amble, as charging infantry commonly did in this war: they hurled themselves at the block of dark copse before them like a great wind or wave bearing down on a mark—with that appearance of having momentum enough to break worlds. The French privates must have got the tip that we were in bad trouble and time pressing, for I never saw troops go that pace before or after: it showed me how Frenchmen must have charged in their old wars, under Napoleon, when nothing in Europe could stand up to them.

I could hear Wyse softly gasping 'Thank God' to himself, like a man who has just had some oil put on a bad burn, and Leroux letting his breath out as if he must have held it for the devil of a time, and Jelf sparing a second of his attention to touch Leroux's arm and say 'C'est beau ça!' The Frenchman flushed up with gratitude.

It was certainly *beau;* but not business. The Germans were ready. And now they were disengaged from other cares, for Bull Wood was theirs again, safe enough. 'One down, t'other come on' is a capital plan for a strong third party who fights single-handed—better by far than to have both opponents come at him at once. In a moment Cock Wood and its many embowered machine-guns seemed to lose all interest in Bull Wood. The whole armament might, by the look of the thing, have whirled round on one swivel to play its multitudinous jets of bullets on the perforable flesh of all those rushing Frenchmen's stomachs. As well might a naked neck hope to defeat the falling knife of a good guillotine. As far as I could see, the whole charging line was laid out on the poppies in one minute. Another line arose in its rear and rushed forward; then a third line rose. But the enemy's men were now sure of themselves and at ease; the scything down

of each successive line became more business-like than the last; the third performance was so prompt that the men in blue had scarcely time to stand upright before they were down, to remain as a bar of new colour in the gay coverlet of the slope.

IV

That really ended the business. By rights this true Cock and Bull story is over. The brigadiers and Jelf had to clear out: they had orders to give, and the bad news to 'phone. But the rest of us lingered a little; Le Bon reluctant, I fancied, to part with so shining a light of his race as Leroux—these Frenchmen think a lot of their big writing people; also I thought I would let the old boy rub his wounds for a minute or two, before meeting his eyes and fetching him home. So I kept on looking out through my glass at the beautiful and worthless prairie where all this mess had been made, only to leave things worse than they were. In the strengthening sunshine a lustrous sabbatical peace had settled down on it all; the benign light rested as tranquilly upon Bull Wood as a mild winter moon shines upon an English copse the night after a shoot, when the pheasants hit but not gathered during the day are bleeding to death or trying to fly with bones broken.

Even now, though, a few atoms were moving; if you looked closely enough you found them. Near the road of white dust I made out a thing like a caterpillar, half blue and half brown, winding its way up towards the front. I examined it. No; not like a caterpillar; that's a continuous thing; this was a queue of dots, more like one of the long trains of ants that form single file, if you kick their hill over, and set about reconstructing the home. Each dot, I soon saw, was the bust of a man walking in some shallow trench that half

hid him; and, like the ants, every bust carried a load in what looked like a sack. The twelve busts that went first were all blue and the other twelve brown. Clearly a rationing party, half British, half French, bringing up food to the troops in the line. But why should French and British fatigue parties thus shog up together? It was an irregularity, almost—the whole caravan was on our side of the road and, strictly speaking, the French twelve were trespassing. I asked Le Bon. He shrugged; he said it was a sort of habit the men on both sides of the road had got into—he couldn't think why; he said the fatigue-men of the two nations wangled it so as to go up together—one or the other lot hurried or loafed enough to make it come so.

Some enemy airman was out playing pointer to some German gunner who liked a little rough shooting over a dog, or under him; just the one big gun, a fifteen-incher or so, out fancy sniping, and that indistinct moth tumbling about in the blue overhead must now have sent word of the khaki and blue caravan. First the hulking sniper dropped a shell a little ahead of the party, then one a little astern of its rear; then one in the road to its right; then one in the poppies out thirty yards to its left. For some moments after each burst the jogging caravan was hidden in smoke; then it appeared again, all of it, still jogging steadily on. A fifth cloud of smoke burst, expanded and thinned off to leeward, and now the four-and-twenty had come down to twelve—her blues still plodding on under their burdens in front, then a break, then two browns, who had stopped. The gunner had got the range now.

'Are you looking?' I said to Leroux.

'Yes, yes,' he said quickly. No doubt he had seen nothing else but that caravan, from the moment Le Bon had said

what it was. Then I heard a passionate mutter, not to me, nor to Le Bon, ' For the love of God, stop. Help them.'

As if the ten specks of blue far out in the landscape had heard, they halted and drew back across the bull's-eye, so to speak, of the enemy's target, towards the two specks of brown. For the next minute I could not see what they were doing. Various reasons prevented me, then the queue of laden ants took shape again. It was just half its old length.

' You saw? ' I said to Leroux. I had perceived that the ten living blues, as well as the remnant of two browns, were now laden with two sacks apiece.

Of course he had seen. He replied in an odd airy way, like a man a bit light in the head after some biggish strain: ' The French corporal swore a great oath—very coarse. He halted his men. He said only " The English must eat," and the men only grunted some vulgar words. Then they went back for the dead Englishmen's sacks.'

' I hope to God,' I said, ' your corporal knows how to drive a spent horse till it drops.' For I thought of the gleeful eyes overhead and the wireless message already gone down to the gun: ' Got 'em. Do it again,' or whatever the Germans say for our airmen's ' O.K.' ' Oh, good man! ' I thought, the next second: the menaced party were pushing along as though their loads had been halved and not doubled. Leroux was jabbering on, in his wondrous good English—the same freakish narrative stuff—mad, but good in a way, for he seemed to have dreamt what was really likely enough. ' The English corporal walked last, so he escaped. The French corporal looked at the Englishman's sleeve and said " Who commands here? You or I? " And the Englishman said to him, " 'Oo bloody cares? You can 'ave it but get a move on " ; and so they went on and were saved. Oh my God! '

The sixth shell had come. But the little party were clear. No blame to airman or gunner: the burst was plumb on the same spot where the fifth had occasioned the crisis which etiquette, in Leroux's vision, had failed to intensify. The smoke cleared to show us the tail of the party sloping down briskly out of the daylight into a safe covered way that led up to the actual front. The combatants' grub was secure. As the last man was just disappearing he half turned his head, I suppose, for the sweat on his face suddenly flashed in the sun like a mirror, almost dazzlingly.

'See!' exclaimed Leroux. 'The English corporal! He heliographs to us!'

'A message, Sir?' Le Bon asked deferentially.

'The message,' said Leroux, 'that common Englishmen send always. Just "There's sense in everything." The message of Molière.'

Le Bon reflected.

SLEEP, GENTLE SLEEP

MACBETH: . . . sleep, the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great Nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast . . .
LADY MACBETH: What *do* you mean?

Shakspeare.

I

IT was the October of 1915, and the place was the fine Plymouth hospital looking out on the Sound. There were a score of us in the ward—surgical cases arising out of the Battle of Loos and now doing well. They had carted us in overnight and the Matron had shaken hands with every Jack man at the door. That showed it was no common War Office place, all diet-sheet and discipline and don't-forget-your-place-my-man.

That was a Tuesday.

More oil and balm came in the morning. Wednesday, the Sister told us, was visiting day. And we knew what that meant. We had heard about it from men wounded before us. Half the kind ladies in Plymouth would come to see us, thirsting for tales of valour and hair-breadth escapes. In their little bags they would have buns, nuts, eggs and oranges. And the steeper each British Othello's story became, the more of these edible pledges of pity would these Desdemonas shed.

Our confidence was not misplaced. Wounded men were not yet the drug that they became when the Battles of the Somme, Arras and Flanders had ruined the market by sheer

over-production. All that afternoon a stream of munificent elderly women, all out for tales of gore, flowed from bedside to bedside. Their little bags were positively cornucopious.

We honestly tried to give good value, as well as get it. Wiser than are the monkeys and bears at the Zoo, we ate nothing there and then. Every bun, every nut, went under the blankets the moment the donor had moved on, lest the next philanthropist to arrive should be given the pain of supposing her egg or orange to be unrequired. And how we did yarn! Othello was a fool to us. Most of us were only common infantrymen, but every one of our tales was quite as tall as a Grenadier Guard. From four to five P.M.—the hour of high 'Change, you might say—there were twenty practitioners of the short story in full blast at one time, bucking away about battles and raids and great doings with bombs and what not. I only once drew breath myself, just to arrange my store of gift groceries with my toes, down at the base of my bed, and then I could hear nineteen voices whizzing along, all together, like this:

'I can say without exaggeration, Mum, the rats in that there trench was equally as big as cats. You'd wake up in the morning an' find one in your arm-pit. Anywhere 'andy to your 'eart them rats would roost.'

'That photo of me wife an' kiddy saved me life twice over. Two diff'rent bullets ricketed orf it. You'd be surprised the way a bullet rickets, ma'am.'

''Arf these Germans use their own rifles. They're game-keepers an' all sorts o' bloody—wash out bloody, ma'am—all sorts o' things.'

'Them French innkeepers! They wown't serve you not a glawss o' beer without you put the money on the counter at the fust gow orf. A nawsty innependent lot. Sow these

Austrylians stawted to brike up the plice. I'm not exaggerytin' when I sye as thet girl in the bar was 'eartbroken to see it.'

'Oh, no, Mum. Me an' the Colonel's the best o' friends.'

There were fourteen other voices at it too; fourteen upright merchants striving with a will to export as much, and as attractive, merchandise as they were importing. Then I too resumed the good work, hammer and tongs, having counted six oranges with my left foot and drawn fresh inspiration from the feel of them. Nothing succeeds like success.

II

But even the most plentiful harvest must draw to an end. By a quarter past six the last old lady had tottered away, full to the brim with hero stunts and sob stories and still longing for more, like the Roman lady in Juvenal who was worn out with the conversation of men but had not had enough of it yet.

We too were a little tired. And, in a way, we were a little ashamed. Still no one could say much to anyone else. We were all in a tale, or a debauch of tales, splendidly mendacious. Together now we stepped down, as it were, from those sublime heights of fancy into the old homely world of mere truth, bringing our bulging sheaves with us.

Private Toomey, next bed to mine, complimented me handsomely. 'If it isn't the grand tale ye told to that old ancient woman—well, get me wan. How in the worl' did it iver come into your head?'

'Which was that?' I asked modestly. I had certainly been in the vein.

'Whethen, the wan wi' the cat in ut—sittin' outside of an

en'my battalion head-quarthers, purrin' loudly an' winkin', an' all the heavy guns of a Corps attimptin' to snipe her. That bate all that iver I heard, for audac'ty.'

'Ah! yes—the cat's audacity,' I said. No doubt I simpered. It seemed only decent not to jump at Toomey's homage as something due to myself.

'No but your own—the courij ye had in invintin' ut first, an' then palmin' ut off on the worl'.'

'Toomey,' I said, quite sincerely, 'that one yarn was true. No other, but that one. Not the purring and winking, of course. That part's only artistry, same as your own. But the ground facts were as stated. Not unto me the praise be given. The Corps did shell the cat.'

Toomey grew graver. 'Ah, then,' he said, 'if that be the case, me own little yarn might ha' done, after all.'

As this was not lucid, I waited. Presently Toomey went on. 'Ye see, when ye're gabbin anny old tripe ye can think of, to childher, ol' women, or others, there'll be a thing, wanst an' again, that ye'll feel ye can't play off at all, anny more than ye could a fifth ace in a game, because their minds' stummicks will turn at th' unlikeliness of ut. An' yet mebbe this thing is the truest of all. For the truth, if ye see what I mean, has a very quare habit. For some old reason or other she'll have a great wish in her mind to think of th' impossiblest thing there could be, an' to set ut off happ'nin'. An' ye may be there at the time, an' see ut all happen, an' yet ye may think ye've a very good right to hold your tongue ever after an' not be gettin' the name of a liar be tellin' the fac's. It's wan of those things I have now in me mind—aye an' wishin' to God that I'd not been fastijjus about ut to-day anny more than yourself let the cat go to waste.'

I tried to console him. 'Trot out your animal, Toomey,

I said. 'Let us look her well over. She may be a winner and all. And there's plenty of time—Wednesdays and Wednesdays before you'll be quit of this place with all the scrap iron you have in your vitals.'

Toomey could see that this was good sense. He was a complicated shrapnel case. First the surgeons dug a bit of hardware out of him. Then they closed down that working, fatted him up for a month, and sank a new pit somewhere else on his person. Unless the whole seam petered out unexpectedly soon, Toomey's life might conform to this rhythm for 'the duration'—the name, at that time, of prospective eternity. So Toomey took heart to relate the truth stranger than fiction.

III

'I'll engage ye'll never have heard,' Toomey said, 'of an off'cer-man that's showin' the whole British army how it should snipe. His name's—divil take what his name is—a name wid two prongs.'

'D'you mean Hilford-Simpson?' I said. I had heard of the rising star of that worker of wonders.

'Ach, but ye know the whole worl'. That's the man. He started in life be commandin' meself an' the rest of me Comp'ny. Fair wild for the snipin' an' mad for Intilligence work. He med me his bodyguard, me bein' wan of the two marksmen there was in the Comp'ny; so I'd be hangin' around when Hilf was at his conthrivin's. Wan was two dummy heads he'd stick up, a short distance apart, for the nearest en'my sniper to perforate wanst. An' then Hilf would lower the targuts an' follow the line of the thracks that the bullets had med through the heads, till be this an' be that, an' trig'nom'try an' angles an' gumption of iv'ry description,

he'd pitch on the square foot of groun' that the bullets had come from. Then somebody's number was up.

"'All simply observation, Toomey," he'd say, the time we'd seen a Fritz sniper rowl over an' done with ut, where there'd been nothin' before but a big bunch of grass. "Observation, an' rashnal inf'rences from ut. An', mind ye, there isn't a thing that's too small to observe. When ye see the rats be night dancin' their reels to the moon on a bit of the en'my's par'pet, they're tryin' to tell ye there's nobody near at the time. An' iv'ry sparra there'd be in a wood will let on if there's somebody in ut, an' what way he's goin'. So down wid it all in the di'ry." I kep' the wise words in me mind.

'He gev me a fiel' glass an' map an' a di'ry. A di'ry's a child's writin'-book wid a shiny black cover. I'd lie at me post as a Comp'ny sniper, loggin' me observations—"Eliven two, ack Imma. Sparras nervous at L.21.d.. 25-65" or "Nine-forty, pip Imma. Rats very aisy indeed at L.21.d. 24-63." An' then Hilf would come roun' an' say I done right. "Only don't cramp your nachur'l style," he would say, "be keepin' entirely to Sparras and Rats, of which creachures," he'd say, "I was makin' mintion be way of illusthration only. A gifted observer," he'd say, "will sthrike out new lines of his own." An' the very nex' day, me bein' wishful to please him, I sthruck out a line.

'The start of the thing was an empty ould bully-beef tin, or mebbe a jam wan. The ph'nom'non was seen flyin' through the air, sof'ly, slightly beyant the en'my's par'pet. The open lid of ut twiddled in flight, the way of a stick of a toc Imma bomb. Whince the tin came, an' the place where it pitched, were whowlly invis'ble. All I could see was th' upper part of the missile's thrajecth'ry—say four feet or five—the sight you'd get of a football, an' you on the outside of the ground. I

logged th' apparition—"Nine-fifty, ack Imma. Tin up at L.21 D. 25-64"—an' wint on observin'.

'I hadn't been at ut ten minuts before the nex' tin tuk the air in th' identical place. So I logged ut. Be th' end of me watch nine rounds of ould tin had been fired. An' nex' day the same, an' the nex' after that. Niver an entire quarther of an hour but wan tin or more lef' the ground.

'Hilf came to me post the third day, wid the ears of him pricked, an' his nose flickin' for scent. "What's this," he says, "about tins?" I gev the partic'lars. "What d'ye infer from ut, Toomey," says he. So says I, "Be the aitin' of beef that they have goin' on, I'd say there's an off'cer's mess at wan ind of the thrack of the tins, an' some sort of a midden at th' other," "Very fair, Toomey," says Hilf, 'very fair. Kape the tins under close observation." I did ut.

'It was the end of July, an' the weather hotter iv'ry day than the last. An' a quare thing was this; at the hours the heat was extrame a suspicion of irrigilar'ty was apt to crape into the tins. Wan mid-day was Purg'thry itself, an' be hivvin, there wasn't a tin up from wan forty-four to a quarther past two. Hilf was sthruck by ut greatly. "Take this clin'cal thermom'ter," he says, "an' wheniver there's flucthuations in tins, log the timp'rachure too. We'll have charts an' curves yit," he says, "an' erict the thing into a sci'nce."

'We had the loy'lest help wid the log from Jacker, me fellow-Comp'ny-sniper. He'd been a stock-broker's clerk, an' he was a man of talent an' high educayshun. It was he that taught me the sci'ntific terms for repoortin' movements in tins. "Tins opened sthrong at stand-to, but sagged as the mornin' advanced." "Tins flat in th' afternoon hours; some regainin' of tone toords night." "Tins exceedin'ly brisk till eliven, then a marked wakeness; three to four-twinty pip

Imma, utther stagnation in tins." Ye'll observe what the gen'ral tindency was.

'Be August the first we were through wi' that Purg'thry, an' well into Hell. But August the siccond bate all. That day was the lad. If ye'd touch your tin hat it ud blisther your hand. Ye could all but hear a slight hissin', the way the sinthries were fried in their fat. Be ten o'clock the timprachure had got the record stiff, an' Hilf was the only sowl in the place that was whowlly awake be eliven. Iv'ry half-hour or less he'd visit me post, wid a dancin' light in his eye. "How's the tin industry, Toomey?" he'dsay, an' I'd quote him tins fev'rishly soarin' till nine, an' thin a bear movement devel'pin' the rest of the forenoon; appreesh'ble revival till two.

'So it wint till a quarther past two, an' thin a mir'cle arrived, for the bottom fell out of the markut, clivver an' clane. Not a tin med an offer to stir for thirty-eight minutes.

'Hilf came, an' I told him. "Begad, the time's come," he says, lookin', for all the worl', like a man that sees he's alone wid a lion, an' he not afraid, an' yet he sees it's a lion.

'"What's that, Sorr?" says I. "Is ut Fritz fallin' back on the Rhine?"

'"Kape your eye," he says "jammed on this absince of tins. Ye've me life in your han's, an' mebbe an entoire platoon's."

'I grew apperhinsive. "Sorr," I began, "if there's anythin' doin'——"

'"Ach, man, be aisy," he says. "I'll not lave ye behind. It's only mad divils, the like o' yourself, I'd have wid me in this." An' that was a nice thing to say.

'He wint off at the double, an' he was back in five minutes. The Colonel was wid him, an' men runnin' up from all parts, bucklin' their belts an' rubbin' the sleepiness out o' their eyes. I couldn' take me own eyes off me job, but I knew, in me guts,

that Hilf would've picked the right men be the only way that'll sift thim, an' that's askin' "Who wants to come?"

'"Pay attention, men," I heard the Colonel sayin'. "Captain Hilford-Simpson will give you your orders."

'Thin the Captain expounded, quiet and confidential. "Men," he says, "be a sthrong chain of evidence I've raison to think iv'ry German beyant is asleep. I'm now steppin' across, to make sure. If ut's the way I suppose, I'll stan' at an openin' I know in th' en'my's wire an' signal you on, an' you will join me widout anny noise. Beyant Fritz's wire you will extind to two paces widout further word of command; you will steal up on the en'my's trench, an' you will lep, five to wan, upon each of the five nearest Germans that's in ut, an' gag him so quick that there won't be a brith of sound to awake the nex' Fritz on either flank of the sictor attacked Then off wid ye home, conductin' the captives. Mind now, no killin' or swearin' or anny description of hullabaloo or disorder. If annyone here wants to get back alive, this affair we're about, must be—from beginnin' to end—an entirely peaceful abduction."

'Thin the Cap. turned to me—"Show the Colonel the tin-mine," he says, "an' fall in wid the party."

'The Colonel himsilf tuk over me post. He'd a whistle stuck in his mouth to blow the Retire to Hilf if a tin would be stirrin'. An' then Hilf departed.

'Ye'll undherstand how manny entirely impossible things had to happen before the man would get off wid his life. Iv'ry German there was in the lan'scape—sinthry or sergeant or off-duty man or off'cer or off'cer's servant or dog—had to be sleepin' a match for the sivven gran' sleepers of Eph'sus. Hilf was bettin' his life that there wasn't a sowl in the greatest fightin' machine in the worl' that could keep an eye open

afther his dinner. If Hilf had been annyone else I'd ha' called him an ijjut. But, he bein' Hilf, 't'was only th' inord'nut good sinse of the man goin' further than madness. Wance Hilf had an inf'rence made, he'd put annythin' on ut—annythin'. If he'd inferred that the fires were out he'd ha' bruk into Hell in thick underclothing. So off he wint promenadin' into the sunshine; all of ut looked infisted an' ven'mous as soon as he wint, the like of a fine Sunday possist with a divvil, an' we list'nin' there from wan jiff to another for Fritz to carry the ixicution out at his aise, an Hilf leggin' ut on from momint to momint of not bein' dead, till he'd ackshally reached Fritz' wire, an' in be the private door, still kapin' alive, till we saw him standin' erict on th' en'my's par'pet an' caref'ly inspictin the trinch. An' then, begod, he signalled us on an' we all ran to him like whipputs, houldin' our tongues wi' the whowle stren'th of our sowls.

'If be anny chance ye've believed me till now, ye may conjicthure the sight that we saw. It was miles beyant human believin'. Did y'iver hear tell about wan Sleepin' Beauty? She was a quane in a tale. They invinted her, siv'rel cinthuries back, to please childhren—a quane with a pallus an' court an' attindants an' gyards, an' the whowle of the set gone to bye-bye for hundreds of years. What we saw was the moral of that. Wan sinthry had whowlly relinquished his rifle an' propped himsilf up for his aise agin the front wall of the trinch, the way that a dhrunk will leave all an' cleave to a lam'post. Another had tuk the back wall for his bed, wi' the head of him sunk on his chist. The par'dos was lower than some, an' two off-duty were in Par'dise upon ut snorin' aloud. A third man not carryin' arms had extinded himself in the shade of the mos' schupendous mountain of ould empty tins that iver ye saw. He had his mouth workin' softly in dhrames.

An off'cer's servant, thought I, the man bein' rel'tively fat, an' at home wi' the tins. He'll ha' thrown them himsilf. An' niver a trace, North or South, widin human sight, of annythin' else but men dhrugged wi' the stren'th o' the sun, schupefied wid ut, an' los' to the worl'. Anny ould attichude did thim. Ye'd have a right to suppose all the sculpchors on earth had been in for a prize for a stachue of Sleep, an' that these were the offers the creachures had made at figgers an' imblims of him an' his pow'rful workin's.

'Hilf did ut the way a conducthor lets loose an orchesthry—lifted his cane an' looked roun' at us all, to mek sure we were chuned, an' thin he swished the cane down through the air, the way a man startin' a race dhrops the flag. An' the men did ut well. Iv'ry man of the five that we were kidnappin' awaked wid his fuchure decided widout anny throuble at all to himsilf; two han's roun' his throat till the gag was well in, an' no bomb or rifle in reach, an' no stabbin, or clubbin' or kicks in the guts, or anny description of maulin's, excipt to his feelin's. An' so they wint quiut. That trinch was a timple of peace, an' no brawl disgraced ut.

'As soon as the five sleepin' beauties an' all their new ret'nue pushed off for the West, Hilf whispered—"Toomey, kape cavey, the time I'll be makin' a sketch of these eximplary earthworks." An' while he was drawin' the trinch in his book, an' me wishful the dhrawin' was done, he said to me slowly an' sof'ly, "Think of ut, Toomey. The whowle way up to the Owcean, mebbe, an' the whowle way down to th' Alps, iv'ry Jerry unconscious."

'"An' some of ourselves noddin' very sevarely," says I. "It's not vice, Sorr. It's naychure," says I. "Look at cats, Sorr," I says.

'"Oh! blow the cap'tal offince," says the Cap. "I'm not

thinkin' of that. What I have in me mind is the way anny army would have it's en'my beat if it could know the way he was feelin'. Victhry's lyin' about on the groun', half the time, to be had for the pickin' it up, if ye knew when to stoop for ut. Gad! I believe we could rowl up the German front line, at this moment, all the way to the say, with one good platoon, if the Higher Comman' wouldn't think it irrig'lar. Well, I suppose we'd betther go home to our tea." So we lift, midditatin'.'

IV

I meditated, too. I had seen the First Battle of Ypres on the day the Germans had got it well won, if they had only known that they had nothing to do but to walk straight on, over a few cooks and clerks, to the sea and the conquest of Europe. Our own turn—as I didn't know then—was to come in two years, at the start of the Battle of Arras. Then we would only have to walk straight ahead, East of Vimy, to pick up victory like a ripe walnut blown down—if only we knew. And, a year after that, the Germans, near Bailleul and near Amiens, would merely have to plod on Westward, through two monstrous gaps in our poor battered line, to win the whole war—if only they knew. War a trial of strength between armies! A test of the relative goodness of causes! More of a kind of gymkhana with extraordinary prizes for all sorts of queer, freakish mindings of small P's and Q's —gumption in putting together one odd-looking two and another, to make about eight.

'Well,' said Toomey, 'j'ou believe ut?'

I never could swallow the story in Shakspeare about a young sailor that went fast asleep at the top of a mast in a storm. Too tall, too steep. But I knew the feel of a bad night

in trenches and then a long day of the tropical sun that dazed and bemused you, even on your feet, into heavenly trances of warm, honeyed peace, away from filth and fatigue and the stink of carrion and the millions of large insolent flies that would scarcely wait to eat you till you were carved for them properly. 'Well,' I said, 'if it's not true it's the lie of your life.'

'I must confiss,' Toomey modestly said, 'that I've not med ut up. I've no jaynius. But tell me, would anny civilian believe ut—wan that niver has known what slapiness is?'

'Why, the bun ladies probably think a nice afternoon nap is the regular thing.'

'Ye think I might feed it them, then, this-da-week?'

'If you don't, I certainly shall.'

'We'll see about ut,' said Toomey complacently 'Rowl on, nex' Wednesday.'

JUDITH

I

THE average youth of twenty may expect to live for some thirty-six years. But if he was an infantry subaltern marching up into the Somme battle front in the Summer of 1916, his expectation of life was thirteen days and a bit. Some men took this contracted horizon in one way, and some in another. One virgin youth would think ' Only a fortnight? Wouldn't do to chuck it in the straight.' Another would think, ' Only a fortnight? And life scarcely tasted! I must gather a rose while I can.'

Phil Gresson thought that he was, on the whole, for the rose. So he got a night's leave from Daours, where his Company lay for two days on its way to the mincing machine at Pozières. Then he borrowed the winking Medical Officer's horse and trotted off into Amiens, pondering what sort of wine to have with his dinner at Gobert's famed restaurant. Burgundy, he concluded: Burgundy was the winiest wine, the central, essential and typical wine, the soul and greatest common measure of all the kindly wines of the earth, the wine that ought to be allowed to survive if it were ever decreed that, after thirteen days and a bit, only one single wine was to be left alive to do the entire work of the whole heart-gladdening lot. He thought it all out very sagely.

Gobert's was full: Gresson just bagged the last single table. Soon the rising buzz of talk drew its light screen of sound in front of the endless slow thud of the guns in the East. Soon, too, the good Burgundy did its kind office, and Phil's friendly soul was no longer alone: all the voices at the other tables had melted into one mellow voice: he recognised it as the genial

voice of the whole of mankind, at its admirable best—not stiff, or cold, or forbidding, as some voices seemed at some times. It set him all a-swim in a delicious reverie about the poignant beauty of this extreme brevity that had come upon life. Thirteen days and a bit—and then all love, all liking, all delight to lie drowned for ever at the bottom of an endless night. Lovely, lovely. The individual life just a mere wisp of an eddy formed and re-formed on the face of a stream, and then smoothed away. Oh! it was good Burgundy. And Phil, a modest and a sober youth, drank more of it than he had ever drunk of any wine at a sitting.

At ten he strolled out of Gobert's, full of beautiful thoughts, and decided first to have a look at the celebrated Cathedral. He was quite an intelligent boy and had read that the great Ruskin thought it, all round, the most topping cathedral in France. So he worked northward, along the Rue St. Denis, to its end and then to the left, to reach the West Front. The West Front looked all right, as far as he could see. But it was a very dark night; no moon, no lamps lit in the streets, all the shops shut. And not many people about. For over the southern suburbs one enemy aeroplane was on duty after another, bombing the railway; and bombs addressed to a railway may be delivered anywhere else.

One ancient trade, all the same, did not slacken, bombs or no bombs. Wherever a British soldier walked, after dark, in the streets of Amiens in that year, a kind of fire-fly lamps would kindle their tiny electric lights in his path; and out of the deepened darkness that each of these made in its rear there would come a whispered assurance that some rose was there and only asked to be gathered.

In the ears of the undebauched Gresson most of these voices were more like curbs than spurs to the promptings of youth.

But just as he turned from the Place Notre Dame, to go back to the Rue du Soleil, the sudden casting of one of the wee jets of electric light on his uniform and his face was followed by an English greeting that pulled him up with a jerk: 'Alone! At this late hour! What would Mother say?'

The mere words were nothing: their jaunty jocosity was the common slang of a trade. Nor was it anything out of the way that the words were spoken in English: half the sisterhood did that in France. What made him stop and say 'Hullo!' was the quality of the voice. It was everything that nobody could expect from the tongue of a street-walker hawking her person to any chance ruffian a foreign army might throw in her way. It had depths and reserves. Like some rare and gifted woman's most fugitive looks, it seemed subtly to index and vouch for many old forces and causes, of slow growth and long operation—character, race, a culture carefully sheltered and long in the building. Besides, the brazen facetiousness had come out, as it were, in spite of some revolt in the speaker. And yet, as he gasped his 'Hullo!' she acted the courtesan with a will. She flashed her lamp on her own face, her hair, her bust, as if to say 'There! See the goods, before buying.'

Gresson gasped again. The woman was a Juno; no, a Tragic Muse—tall, deep-bosomed, the regular features grave with a deep and ample expressiveness, the face of one of those most beautiful women who have achieved an intense absorption in some other thing than their own beauty. And she doing this!—she that, to see or to hear, made you feel how gloriously far a woman may be from a mere slave or a mere animal. There must be some enormous mistake somewhere, some sort of fantastic illusion. All the ardent, super-rational respect of clean-minded boys for womankind in the mass was

tingling in the voice of Gresson when he made shift to answer politely, in his bad French, 'And you, Madame! Under enemy fire!'

'Enemy? German?' she asked.

He explained that the dry buzz which was then growing louder was more smoothly continuous than the hum of any British aeroplane. 'He's coming this way,' he said, 'Look!'

He pointed upwards at a white patch that had just broken out on the under side of a cloud almost directly above them. At that place the fiery stares of two British ground searchlights had just rushed together. They had been searching the sky for the raider, each light working on its own, as two town policemen search a suspected backyard with their lanterns. Now one of them had found, and the other had instantly wheeled round to share in the find and to help keep the quarry in sight. Like a fly walking on a high ceiling, a black speck was scudding across the disc that the searchlights had painted in luminous fresco on the black dome of night. But the disc moved with the speck: wherever the speck went, its halo of brilliance was round it.

The girl gazed up eagerly. When she sighted the thing that was ranging the sky, with its glory all about it, she let out an 'Ah!' that made Gresson feel sure she was not funked at all, and yet that she was decidedly stirred.

'Like God!' she muttered. It made Gresson start. The words had an aptness, no doubt, to that enskyed engine of wrath, remote, alone, girdled with light, throbbing with power, like a Jehovah of old when he floated out on black wings over a culpable earth, with his bolt in his hand. But, Gosh! what a woman, to see it like that! French, and yet able to stand off and see a Boche bomber busy above her as anything but a foul vampire bat let out of Hell for an hour

Our Tommies might think in that detached way about enemies. But a civilian!—a woman!—a French one at that! She must be a genius.

While Gresson digested this latest course of the full meal of surprise that the evening had brought him, Jehovah let fly, to some purpose. When a bomb of some size falls anywhere near in the dark, it feels as if the big splash of flame from the burst were all round you. The sound, too, fills your whole world for a moment. Then there comes, just for a second, a quite remarkable silence, and then certain smaller noises consequent on the original smash, begin to rise clear of the silence. When Gresson's eyes and ears came to themselves, a large broken branch of a tree was settling down to the ground with a soft leafy crash of crushed boughs, some man up the street was screaming with pain, and the singular girl was a blob of black daubed anyhow on the blackish grey of the pavement. The metal of her little flash-lamp tinkled on the stone as it fell out of her slackening hand.

He grabbed the lamp and looked at her. She was aliver her eye flinched under the light. She had no obvious wound. But she had the look that Gresson, a youth now well versed in bloodshed, liked least of all the looks painted on faces and bodies by the queer artistry of scientific slaughter. It was the battered, bullied look of a mouse kicked to death in the dust. As often happened through the caprices of shell-fire, she was stripped half-naked; her hat, with its flowers, was tumbled and spoilt, the little gewgaws of her pitiful occupation were all disordered. What remained of her clothing was knocked about, dirtied and torn.

That grotesque and cruel disarraying moved the young expert in carnage more than he could have believed until he felt it. All thought of sex was gone in a moment. Now she

was only a sort of poor human rag-doll that had been used as a football—that or a child caught and horribly mauled by some brute of a force while trundling her little soiled hoop through the mud. He laid her easy and straightened her dishevelled clothes as well as he could and then waited a minute, wondering whether a flake of the bomb had done her business for good, or only grazed and badly shocked her. In either case, what must he do? Get her to a hospital, he supposed. While he leant over her, thinking, she suddenly spoke, faintly but in the most earnest entreaty, as though she had detected his thought. ' Not to a hospital. No.'

' All right,' he assured her. ' Don't worry.'

She took a moment of rest and then said, in a voice that tried to be firm, ' Will you help me to rise? '

He tried, and she made a game effort. It was hopeless. One knee was clean out of action. When she attempted to use it her whole weight came upon him at once. ' Madame,' he urged, 'may I carry you to the hospital? It is two hundred yards only.'

She said, ' No, no, I beg you, for the love of God,' so piteously that he was silenced. ' You don't know,' she said in a passionate whisper, ' the way French hospital people would treat a—a woman like me.'

That brought him a new pang of compassion. He couldn't do what she dreaded so much. But, Lord! how his mess would guffaw, could they see him there now, stuck and perplexed, with the head and neck of a Midianitish tragedy queen sustained in his arms! ' But, Madame, what to do? ' he said, in a voice almost as imploring as hers.

' You'll help me?—no? ' she entreated, always in English. ' I live—oh; not very far off, with you helping me. I have a friend there—I'll be all right there if, with your infinite goodness——— '

But no mere helping would do it. Shyly and carefully he lifted her up in his arms, said 'You must tell me the way,' and so set off, he knew not whither, through the empty and echoing streets. She steered him up the Street of St. Denis, along the Street of the Three Pebbles—the Regent Street or Broadway of Amiens—and down the smaller Street of the Three Naked Bodies without Heads to an unlighted house at its far end.

Not a soul did they meet on this picturesque progress except a corporal's party of English Military Police, out upon their everlasting quest of drunks and strays. As a matter of form, the corporal challenged the odd caravan. He was not scandalised seriously. Any natural gift for wonder with which a British soldier-policeman set out to scour the streets of Amiens in those days was much assisted to wear itself out. Even the sight of a second lieutenant bearing away a pallid Aspasia, with blood dripping from the long heels of her shoes, did not astonish. 'Pass, British officer, and all's correct' was the formula that the corporal used to disclaim further interest in the incident.

Gresson could have wished that the words described the case better. Correct! Why, not to speak of its more general lack of correctness, the girl had moved convulsively in his arms at the corporal's challenge; one of her hands had plunged somewhere into her dress and had not altogether come out again, but he could have sworn that between its half-hidden fingers he saw the shine of a silvery little pistol—the miniature kind that can give you an adequate dose, and yet have a remarkably small displacement of air in a pocket.

'I shouldn't bring that any further out if I were you,' Gresson had said at the moment—in his bad French, but in the fatherly tone that an old professional handler of arms of

precision may permit himself in explaining the etiquette of their use to an inexperienced young woman. And she had taken it so—had left the fire-arm in its lair and had brought the hand out and shown him its palm, open and empty, and said, 'See! I am *sage*,' like a French child when it vows to be good. But why pistols at all?

And why the queer mode of their entry into the dark little house in the Street of the Three Naked Bodies? He was for ringing the bell, but she said, 'No. Please bring me near. I will knock,' and then she beat a curious little tattoo on the glass panel with a big ring that she wore. It was as if somebody had been standing just on the other side of the door, waiting in the dark for that tattoo, so immediately did a dim light appear within and the door open. Its opener was a staid woman of thirty or so, in the rig of a hospital nurse, who lost her composure at once, gave a cry of horror and flung herself on the patient with a wild outburst of sorrow and tenderness.

'She's hurt. Can't walk. A bomb, you know,' said Gresson, in his bad French. 'Permit me to carry her to her room.'

The nurse, gulping sobs and alternately charging ahead a few steps and looking anxiously back, gave him a lead up the stairs. Concerned as he still was, it was a relief to be out of the streets. Here would he see, at any rate, no British corporal. Sheltered from public derision, he could take notice of things. And what a house it was! Every lamp, every hanging, every fireplace and chair had the grim, cold, dully classical look common in French bourgeois interiors. He had been billeted in such houses. But the home of the stodgiest trader, the steeliest country attorney, had looked less drearily loyal to the conventions than this. And it an arbour for Venus, a Paphian bower! Why, it was enough to freeze a Bacchante.

These women, too! A dim lamp overhead will make almost any face appear grave, but neither of theirs needed that. They made him feel he had gained their good-will, but also that there was something about them which he was utterly 'out of'—far outside it, and never to come any nearer, and yet unaccountably warmly regarded. Could that be common in women for whom the bedevilment of their womanhood had become a career? And how the damaged one had stuck the torments that his joggly walk must have inflicted! A Joan of Arc, begad!

He laid her reverentially down on her bed that the other showed him. Then he put on the right cheerful tone, as he thought, for the sick, and said farewell in his decentest French. 'Eh, bien, au revoir, Mesdames.'

With a most friendly earnestness the wounded woman said, 'No. Never. Never. If you should ever meet me again, by an accident, you are to think only this—that you are in danger, and go away very quickly, without looking or speaking. Please do not think me ungrateful. I was not unconscious, not for one little moment, to-night. I know all your courage and kindness and strength and your clean and delicate heart when I was abased. I only say "Never" because this is the one kind thing I can say without a disloyalty.'

She spoke with feeling, as if there were really some dreadful danger, as in the old romances, from which he was to be guarded. Well, he supposed that a 'woman of pleasure,' with all that she knew, must want to warn any man, to whom she wished well—to warn him off her own world with its expense of spirit and its wastes of pain. He looked across at the older woman, as if in appeal against a judgment too drastic.

Between the two women there seemed to pass glances that questioned and answered, and then the elder one shook her

head too, always with that blended expression of reticence and benevolence.

He couldn't help jibbing, at the last moment, against this decree of finality in his severance from an enigma so beautiful. 'Madame,' he said rather pleadingly, 'may I not have even a name to remember?'

She turned her dead-white face on the pillow and looked at his eager ingenuous one—the face of the English 'nice boy,' at its nicest—with a sort of fierce kindness. 'Yes,' she said, 'Judith. Remember it carefully.'

She closed her eyes, and the other woman let him out of the house.

He went off straight to ring at the Hotel du Rhin and get a bed. He felt, in a way, a little discomfited. Had he not gone forth, like others, to see life and have a good time, as they say? Had not the Medical Officer winked when he borrowed the horse? What would they say in the mess when he went back and avowed that he still had his ridiculous innocence? Wouldn't they laugh? And yet he was elated, too. He hadn't got what they thought so much of. But he had got what, somehow, was bigger. The skirts of something high and passionate had brushed him as it passed. In some indefinable way there was more in the world than before: life was a taller adventure.

II

An average, however accurately drawn, is only an average. It isn't a maximum. Not through any precaution of his, Gresson survived the next fortnight. He did well in a futile attack and under a smashing counter-attack. When the rags that were left of the Division were taken out of the line, he was the only officer left in his Company. So he was now the

acting commander of all the thirty-seven N.C.O.'s and men that were left on their legs.

Through Albert and Amiens the dog-tired remnant trailed back at his heels to Ailly, on the Somme, to rest and re-fit, and one of its many long halts was made under the trees of the Boulevard du Mail at Amiens, a few minutes' walk from the Street of the Three Naked Bodies. Gresson's own legs felt like sackfuls of lead, but he plodded off to get a daylight glimpse of the casket containing the mystery. All its mystery was gone. A fly-blown 'House to Let' bill was stuck in a window: the shutters were closed.

So that was to be the absolute end of his one Arabian night's entertainment. He stumped back to the men who were lolling and chaffing under the dusty leaves, and in ten minutes more they tramped off for Picquigny and Ailly.

Gresson asked nothing more of God and the great and wise among men than that his acting command should be made substantive. But the ways of Higher Commands are not a subaltern's ways, nor are his wishes theirs. Just when the men were getting comfortably settled in and playing football rapturously in the August dust, orders came to Ailly from on high for Gresson to report at once to Colonel Mallom, of Intelligence, at G.H.Q.

He found this red-tabbed Colonel refreshingly unregimental. He talked to a fellow as if such things as ranks did not exist. So Gresson, he said—he seemed to know all about Gresson—had taken an engineering course at Charlottenburg, before 1914. Yes, a two-year course. Did Gresson know Germany well? Some bits of it—yes—Dusseldorf, Cologne, Bonn, Frankfort—most of the Rhineland. Did he speak German well? Even the humble-hearted Gresson couldn't deny it as flatly as he could deny any imputation of

speaking good French. Hadn't he and his sister had a beloved Hanoverian governess all the days of their childhood? Anyhow, the Colonel cut out any modest shilly-shally by speaking himself, from that point onward, in German of a perfection that Gresson observed with respectful, though silent, astonishment. Gresson, in turn, seemed to make a handsome impression. 'Gad!' said the Colonel, reverting to English at last. 'Some linguist! *You* won't be a Second Loot long.'

'I'm in acting command of a Company, Sir,' Gresson replied, with some pride.

'And that's a damn fine thing to be,' said Mallom cordially. 'I've tried it. I've tried only one thing that's finer. D'you guess what it is?'

'I don't, Sir,' said Gresson. In fact he doubted whether the world contained such a jewel.

'It's a game,' said the Colonel, 'with much the same risk, only you take it alone, and you take it dead cold—no one within fifty miles who isn't an enemy.'

'I see it now, Sir,' said Gresson.

'Of course it's a volunteer's job. I don't press you to go into Germany—don't even advise you. All I say is that, with your local knowledge and very exceptional German and—if you'll excuse me—your very ingenuous mug, you might do Intelligence work of deuced high value. Feel like it?'

Gresson's heart was jumping with glee. Why, here he was, at the very heart of the rose, let into the last, inmost mystery and thrill of glorious war. 'Who wouldn't, Sir?' he said.

III

In a snug country house in Artois a party of British officers seemed to be living a nice peaceful life of their own for a good

part of the war. They did not dine out, but men from neighbouring messes would see two or three of them on the road and would think what an odd lot they were, and how fresh and unweathered the coveted ribbons that most of them wore, and what indoor people some of them looked, and how much time they all seemed to have on their hands for a walk or a ride. Some wag suggested that they had founded a sort of male convent, the latest wonder of the war, where all the official rewards of combatant valour were gained by an innocent life of fasting and prayer. Probably none of the neighbours noticed that now and then one of these persons of leisure would disappear for a few days, or a month, or altogether, nor knew that one of the hermits had just been listed in the 'Gazette' as 'Missing: believed to have died in enemy hands.'

In this shy place and in other purlieus of Intelligence the ingenuous Gresson now went to school. He learnt the whole system and structure of espionage and of counter-espionage, its twin sister. He got up the 'Underground Railway'—the routes by which escaped British prisoners of war or hunted spies were guided, and passed on from guide to guide, till a 'ferry' across the enemy line had been reached and the final rush must be risked. He heard about the pigeon post and the little fire-balloons that sailed off eastward on west winds with a pigeon or two in the basket hanging below, and the little flame nicely adjusted to let the balloon down where friends would expect it, about the right distance behind the enemy's front. His mind came to see Germany and the occupied parts of Belgium and France as a map speckled thickly with infinitesimal spots of sound British red—eyes and ears of British Intelligence, noting each movement of German troops, guns, supplies, railway metal and hospital outfit.

Those were the local agents, and now and then they had to be visited, as a merchant in New York or London visits his outlying agents in China or Africa, just to judge their efficiency and devotion, hearten them up, coach them in the latest modes of publicity, transport and salesmanship, and instil the inspiring faith that good work never passes unseen by the Olympian eyes of the firm and that shining guerdons await the virtuous. Oh! plenty to learn. And, presently, plenty to do, not obtrusively.

IV

He had become, in two years, a neat hand at the trick, and a Major with good marks to his name, when an airman still more boyish than himself put him down in the dusk of a winter evening on a great frozen field in the bend of the Rhine between Godorf and Cologne

In the eye of reason such a descent was not possible. It was almost as if a German plane had set down passengers in Richmond Park. But some bluffs depend for success upon their very absurdity. They are too mad to be guarded against. Major Gresson's pink-faced pilot had plenty of time to bid the impudent farewell, 'So long, old son,' and then to rise cannily from the petrified mud and rough grass of the field, and to wind up his steep spiral staircase of air to the height he wanted, before every searchlight from Bonn to Cologne was groping for him all over the sky.

A German anti-aircraft gun on a fast motor lorry was on the spot in five minutes, eagerly guided for the last few hundred yards by a discharged Bavarian soldier, who had seen everything. 'A single seater, Sergeant. A small biplane,' he informed the N.C.O. in charge of the gun. 'I think the

swine had engine trouble. My God! if I'd had my old rifle! But ach! this for-ever damned leg! I couldn't even get near him in time.'

The poor man did, indeed, walk very lame from the knee-wound that had ended his soldiering days and sent him tramping the roads of the Rhineland in his old Army tunic and boots, with the interval filled by a pair of the reach-me-down trousers of peace. He also wore the Iron Cross and he made no secret of a pocketful of chits redounding enviably to his military honour. His face was young, fair and ingenuous, but he took a good look at the red-worsted regimental number on the sergeant's shoulder-strap before he said much about his own regiment.

The little flutter was soon over. The sergeant presented the youthful veteran with a cigar and took himself off with his gun and its crew. Then the lame Bavarian hobbled off briskly along the high road running into the north, where a turbid red glow on the under-side of a cloud marked the site of Cologne. The twilight was all but night now; a thin whistling wind stung the Bavarian's face; the black frost was hardening.

About every half mile the Bavarian stopped dead and listened carefully. Not a boot except his own was ringing on the road. After each time that he thus made sure of being alone, he had much less of a limp, and went much faster, till it was getting near time to listen again. When the few bleared window-lights of the village of Roden came into sight he limped very badly again.

That was a Tuesday evening. In the evening dusk of the following Monday the super-boyish pilot, with nobody in the observer's seat, was to turn off his engine, at some immense height in the sky and great distance away, and slope

silently down to the very spot where he had made his first landing. There, if still alive, a German ex-soldier was to be blowing his nose with a white hanky and whistling 'The Watch on the Rhine,' with some slight variations, but always fortissimo.

This, you perceive, was a thoroughly reasoned arrangement. Having been caught asleep there, only six days before, the Germans were sure to be on the watch at that point—so sure that it was also sure that no British pilot would be such a fool as to take liberties there for a long time to come. So sure of this were the Germans certain to be, that it was quite a sound spec for the British Air Staff to assume that no place could be safer for that boy to land on, next week. You see, we all grew into psychologists during the war. We probed into layer below layer of our enemy's thoughts, second thoughts, counter-thoughts, forethoughts and afterthoughts. Sometimes we brought off grand strokes in this way. And sometimes we didn't.

V

Gresson's long tour of calls on the agents was finished before noon on the Sunday. He was enormously glad of it. Each call had been a separate danger. For many spies are in the pay of both sides. It means double money, and also protection behind either front and lots of news to be got on each side and sold on the other. Their double game is often known to one or both of their employers; but, even then, they may be thought to be useful. Bits of false news may be deftly put in a double spy's way, for him to snap up and convey to his second paymaster.

But even a double spy may have other and more intractable passions to clash with his deep thirst for coin. He may really

be backing one side: he may secretly want it to win: and it *may* not be the right one. A spy has been known to make a quite dramatic final break with one of his two clients in business. The last time that one capital spy, as he had been thought, was dropped behind the German front he took a shot with his revolver at the English aeroplane that had just dropped him. Others 'declare to win,' as we say on the turf, by denouncing a fellow-spy whom they meet in the country of their choice.

Gresson knew all this. And whatever people may say of the thrills and fine savours of peril, it was never with any flawless and whole-hearted enjoyment that he went into the house of some venal scrub who at any moment might throw up the window and yell for a policeman to lead Gresson off to the slaughter. Between each of these calls and the next he would rest from fear for a little and look into shop windows, or at the scenery, till he felt he could do with another dose of blue funk. By mid-day on Sunday he was as tired of the hard labour of holding down his apprehensions as you might be if you had been shaved thirty times in a week by a person who might or might not feel like cutting your throat—about even betting each way.

Now, Gresson, although he was getting on very well as a serpent—in a professional way and for the good of his country—was still a bit of a dove in some other ways. He was simple: he did not keep up with the more brisk-minded youth of his day; he was a poor hand at sneering; it never occurred to him that a thing must needs be wholly rubbish if other people had treasured it for a few hundred years. In fact he was unconventional, and he did and thought what he liked, without shouting about it. This careless disrespect for current fashion was privately carried so far that he went quite often to church,

merely because he liked going. And, though he had no genius for prayer, as some people have, he had a private hobby of glowing, when he was in church, with intense and humble longings for things, of the more decent sort, that he specially valued or admired, and also of working up a fervent sort of gratefulness—to whom, he couldn't say—for everything that had lately gone well with him. So it occurred to him now that, having half a day free in Cologne, he would go to the afternoon service in the Cathedral.

He found an empty seat in the inner South aisle, near a pillar and slightly turned to the left, so that it gave him a view of all the huge nave. There was scarcely another man in the place. All the thousands of women who filled it were wearing dead black, and most of them the dress of widows—half a furlong of widows. Some of the faces were veiled and some not. Even of the veilless women many were soundlessly weeping: many other faces were marred with the salt scald of more secret tears.

The winter daylight was failing; the lamplight was meagre; opposite Gresson, in the North windows, the prelates and saints and heraldic blazonments were sinking into mere lustrous darkness. The dim religious light was its most sombre self: the Gothic forest gloom, the death of the short, bitter day, the shadows in the hearts of all these smitten women, the great cloud blackening over a falling nation—Gresson felt them all press in upon him together and quiet and soften him.

As the service went on, he insensibly gave himself up to it more and more wholly. He let it work upon him as it would. Soon he lost all consciousness of his disguise and his danger—indeed, of everything but the rite, the chanting, the figure implied and evoked by it all, the figure of youth and its gifts,

even the gift of the clean soul's inner serenity, given up freely for love of something undeservedly beloved. Just to hold alive in his mind the idea of that was an ecstasy to be prolonged at the full height and heat of its joy by gazing intently at something, anything, the flame of a tall candle, the gleam of a lectern of brass. So he gazed level, along a row of the ranged faces, at a light burning beyond, till a trivial movement in front of him broke the precarious spell of this highly strung reverie. One of the faces had made a half-turn towards his own, as though the intensity of his gaze had emitted a jet of some sort that could brush past a cheek and be felt. A woman was gazing at him steadily with an air of utter astonishment.

He knew her at once. She wore widow's clothes: her features were thinner: some force would seem to have taken them when they were softer than now and moulded them into a fixed tragic mask: if all the lost hopes in the world had been shovelled into one grave, such a mask might have been put at its head. Yet he knew her at once. No other face, he was sure, could have had just that proud sculpturing of the brows and the chin, or the poised self-control of the lips and eyes that he had carried, in all their harlotry kit, through the streets of Amiens.

But she here! Why, of course—she, too, must be here as a spy. Not in the regular way, for she would have been on his list. Perhaps she was one of the fearful women of legend, queenly and monstrous Delilahs, the vessels of sadic vengeance that have delighted to turn an enemy's lusts into gins and knives to trap him and stab him. He fancied that France had given birth to such women before. The Medical Officer had told him so.

The service was ending, women rising wearily from their knees, shaking their skirts a little and streaming away. The

chimaera woman waited a little. Gresson waited too, till she gave him a look or gesture—he wasn't sure which, but he knew that he was being bidden to follow her out. As she moved towards the West door he fell in behind her.

Where a weak lamp burned under the porch she stopped, turned and said, 'So? It is you!' in the German that all must speak there.

'I trust you recovered,' he said, 'without very bad pain.'

'Pain!' she seemed to reject the idea that such pains could matter. She looked at his motley get-up as a disabled soldier, discharged, and wearing out bits of his old uniform. Her eyes softened a little. 'And so,' she said, 'all the time, you were one of us—and on duty, like me, in that horrible city—horrible!'

'Us!' His word was little more than a gasp—the escape that must come when the breath has been taken away by some smashing news or strange vision. 'May we walk on?' he said. 'There?' He pointed to the wide flagged space, east of the Domhof, where nobody used to walk then.

She nodded and walked on beside him. He used every second of silence to think the case out in his head and to plan an escape for himself. So that was what she had been—the seductress-spy of all ages—and he the British fool-officer who was to babble in her arms. She might have caught him too. Thank God for that bomb! But now she had him—caught, done for, the moment his German slipped up or he let out a fact that gave him away.

They had reached the big vacant flagged square when she asked abruptly, 'You knew what I was when you saved me? You knew I was dead if they once got me into a hospital, with the papers I had in my clothes?'

He didn't answer. He asked his own question. 'Papers, Madam? British papers? Army ones?'

'Of course. Every shred I had got on that journey in France.'

'From British officers? Whom you had——?' Imprudent but uncontrollable anger was flaming up in his mind. To think of poor devils, perhaps his own friends, under their sentence of death, trying to get their last gulp of pleasure out of this world, and then tricked by this dignified harlot into betraying the lives of their men! And yet it was part of his nature to pull in his tongue before it could say the most venomous word.

But she understood, partly. 'No,' she said. 'Yours was the first British uniform I had approached—in that way. That was the miracle. God put a German inside it, to guard me—a true German, pure-minded, brave. Yes, it was a miracle—I was like Abraham. I had risked what was most precious to me, and at the last moment my sacrifice had been spared me, and you were the last man, as well as the first, to whom I was to offer my body.'

Amazement was quenching his anger. It shouldn't have done so. It wasn't his job to be moved, or to admire. It wasn't the way to get home and bring the goods with him. And yet he was moved. There are times when you feel not to yield admiration, even to enemies, would be treason to all that is finest in life. He murmured, 'You offered that sacrifice!'

'What woman wouldn't—for Germany—if she knew all that I knew?' Her voice was not loud, but it had the brooding fervour that some women's have when they bend and doat in ecstasy over a child. They stopped short on the flags. 'Only listen!' she said, and he felt a detaining finger placed on his sleeve.

The unlighted streets had emptied. Silence was almost complete. Through it there rose to their ears the urgent whisper of a great river busy at its work, brushing a hundred piers and quays with the insistent swish of its voluminous stream. 'The Rhine!' As she breathed the word she seemed to cling to it and caress it, as if just to utter it were a key giving entrance to gardens of felicity. 'The Rhine and the vines and the forests and all the old, kind, simple life of brown, hard-working people in villages, and the songs and dear ways of our own.'

He muttered, 'How could you do it?' He had a sister who would have done much for England, but some things were almost unthinkable.

'See,' she said more quietly, as a friend reasons with a friend. 'My husband was killed in the month of our marriage. My two brothers were killed. I had no sister. My father and mother were dead. And we were losing the war, and my husband had said you could win any war if you only knew what your enemy had in his mind. And Judith had won a great war in that fearful way, and why shouldn't I? But, oh! the horror of it—yes, you're right, you understand—the thought of some foul lusting boar, half-drunk, with his slobbery tusks. And then the miracle came and you were courteous and noble and delicate in your heart and your hands. Do you know what I wished—in my mind, secretly, when I thought you were English, I wished, with all the strength of my heart—of course, it was only a wild, fantastical wish—that some day that one Englishman—only just he—might be in a danger as deadly as mine was, and I there to help him.'

'You *would* have helped him?'

'Yes.'

'Even if his were the very same danger as yours?'

'You mean, if he——?'

'Yes—if he were in Germany, doing what you did in France? If you met him here, now, skulking about in disguise, and you suddenly saw who it was?' Some thirty paces away, across the dark square, a sentry in front of a building paced up and down on his post, with a smart little stamp of a foot at each about turn. 'Would you call out to that sentry?' said Gresson.

He didn't know why he was putting it to the touch and taking her at her word. We don't know why we do many things that we do. Something other than reason, something below it, emits an imperious impulse that comes to the top like a bubble of air from the invisible bed of a pool. It must burst into action.

She saw in a moment what he was avowing. She stopped dead; she seemed to grow taller. He felt he had lost the great throw; he was done for—had tried to strike on something that might be responsive in her ferocious and generous mind, and had struck on the ferocity only. In the dark he could see her eyes burn at him like those of a beast crouching back in a cave. 'You dared!' she said, with an intense quiet fury. 'You dared to prostitute that uniform!—that Cross!'

The game was all but up. And one thing he could swear would not help him with her, and that was to whine. 'You dared worse, you brave woman,' he said. 'You were shameless.'

For a second or two she said nothing, under his taunt. She stood perfectly still. The queer clear calm which extreme danger brings to some men had come on him now. He wondered almost tranquilly—was anything within her mind struggling with anything else? Had he a single friend left in that redoubtable citadel?

When she did speak, it was low and resentfully. 'Why to God did you tell me?'

'God knows. *I* don't,' he said, quite sincerely. 'Perhaps because you had said things about yourself—frightfully intimate things. It feels better to give a bit back, in the confidence line, and not do all the taking. Sort of vanity, probably. Well, aren't you calling that sentry?' He asked almost sharply, prompted by some inarticulate guide like a wrestler's perception of when to shift his grip, or strain harder, or give for a moment.

She made some gesture—he couldn't see what it was: he guessed it to mean she put off, for a few minutes more, his sentence of death. Her voice, when it did come, was almost a wail. 'What possessed you to come? You!—a man, with clean fighting to do! A woman has nothing to use but cunning and sex. But a man! What need had *you* to turn spy? What devil possessed you?'

He did not weigh the words of his answer. A hare with the breath of a greyhound hot on her thighs does not weigh this and that. Some god gives her the tip when to double, and which way to go, and she does it. 'Listen again,' he said in his turn, and so pressingly that she too held her breath and the Rhine could again be heard whispering earnestly. 'Listen to it—you,' he said in a low voice as earnest as its. 'You think *I* have got nothing like that in my ears? I live in a house on the Thames, near a weir. When I was a boy I went off to sleep every night to the sound of the lasher—water tumbling about at the end of our garden—always the same and always changing, like somebody's voice. Well, that's *my* Rhine. That's the voice of *my* country, to *me*. It's what told me to put on this kit and come here. When I lie down in your prison to-night, I shall hear it until I'm asleep.

I don't suppose all this is rational. Your Germany may be a much finer country than ours. It's love, though. Isn't that the thing to go by? Don't it make everything right that's done for it—even what you were going to do for it—even what I'm doing here? '

' Go quickly,' she said, ' before I remember my duty.'

He made out that she was extending a hand in farewell. He found it ungloved and kissed the back of it twice. ' You are even more splendid,' he said, before letting it go, ' than I thought you, that night in Amiens.'

' And you,' she said, ' have the great heart that I saw in you then.'

She hurried off towards the riverside quarter beyond the black bulk of the Cathedral, and Gresson hurried off, almost forgetting to limp, the opposite way, to hide in the thronged Hohe Strasse and make for the old Severin Gate in the South. Cologne was a sizeable city, but not big enough to hold that magnificent woman and him.

VI

As punctual as a constitutional King the plane glided silently down the long slant from the clouds to the field in the bend of the Rhine. ' Not nabbed, Sir, yet?' the cheerful boy said airily, as Gresson scrambled in. ' Simple souls, these Germans.'

Gresson wasn't so sure. But there was no need to answer. The whirling blast from the propeller had begun to blow the hoar-frost off the turf under the plane. Nothing more could be said without effort, or easily heard, until the many-coloured lights of their home port came rushing forward and upward to bring the frozen traveller in.

IN THE WAYS OF HIS HEART

I

I WENT down to-day to re-visit St. Mell's, on the Thames, where I had lived till I was twenty. When I was that old my parents had died; the winds that blow young men about the world had dispersed my brothers and me, and we had sold our father's house to some stranger. So I had not seen St. Mell's for a good forty years till to-day. Not that I wasn't fond of the place. It was only that I had got on, and success keeps you busy.

You cross to St. Mell's by a ferry belonging to nobody in particular. Any licensed waterman who can lay hold of a boat may ply for hire there. This had made the ferry, when I was a boy, a recognised refuge for watermen out of a job, or too old to work much. By taking turns to scull people across they could earn the price of a meal or a pint, but they couldn't get rich. There were too many of them. You see, there was no dole in those days, and old men got no pensions.

When I reached the ferry steps no boat was waiting on that side. So I shouted across. A faint hail responded. Through the pale golden mist of the fine autumn forenoon I could make out a dim figure that slowly took motion, on the opposite shore, and a dim boat slowly detaching itself from the bank. Soon I could just hear, in the motionless air's utter stillness, a dipping of sculls almost unthinkably lifeless. I understood that. I remembered the sort of old boys that used to be here in my time, veterans twisted and cramped with rheumatics, used-up men who were removed immeasurably from one's self, secluded far out of reach among the mysteries and glooms of failure and old age.

Could they have ever really been young? Could any of them ever have resembled that figure and symbol of wild overflowing vitality who had once come among them, just for the moment, as if sent to give a vivid measure of the tragic distance separating those frozen ancients from the warm centre of life. Jock Gaddom—that had been this meteor's name. I remembered him well.

No lack of pith had brought the young Jock to the ferry. Rather, excess of it or—these wondrous creatures betray you into mixed metaphors—the vivacious splash of animal spirits so high that they had to spill over the rim now and then. Jock had come to sojourn at the ferry like some young ruffler of the Middle Ages who had killed his man in a jovial affray and had then fled for sanctuary to a company of elderly monks till the thing should blow over. Simply in the gaiety of April blood Jock had 'given lip' with some sprightliness to a crabbed employer. So a good man had lost a good job. But of course he would soon get another. Wasn't he the prettiest and fastest sculler on the river, bar Bill East? Hadn't he won Doggett's Coat and Badge in his apprenticeship? Didn't everybody like his laughing lip and bold good-humoured eye and straight nose and choleric spirit that hadn't got one grain of venom in it, whatever mad things it led him to do?

II

I know how I, for one, had liked Jock when we were both twenty and he had just come to the ferry after the smash. And somehow he took to me, Heaven knows why: certainly not by way of making up to someone better off than himself. For he had no slavish instincts at all. He was one of the few men I have known, high or low, who could talk like a comrade

across the spiked railings of class, just as if no railings were there. Some fellows have learnt the knack since, in the War. But it took no war to make Jock a brother for anyone.

I had told him a few grand notions of mine before he let on about any of his. He seldom spoke of himself; but when once he took you into his confidence he would shirk nothing. What came then fairly knocked me humble with surprise at the strange humbleness of heart that you will sometimes find in a man who looks, on the outside, like a bit of a conqueror.

Jock told me he had a young lady: no engagement yet; only walking out; but very high hopes before this last bit of trouble. 'A wonder she is,' Jock assured me. 'A proper world's wonder.' It seemed she was practical too: she had cut up pretty rough about Jock's losing his job—'chucking it away' she had said. He must give over playing the fool, she had told him; else she was done with him. Jock adored her the more for this proof of sagacity. Oh! he was well in the toils, was Jock. He had turned deadly serious—'fair burning,' he told me, to get a good job, and to keep it this time and make her a home. But that couldn't be done in a moment. And, while he waited and burned, nothing would satisfy this magnificent innocent but to 'do something for' the beloved one.

Now here you must try really hard to believe me. You won't find it easy. I didn't, myself, at the start—and I had known Jock. He was an almost incredible person, and yet absolutely real—much more real than most of us. Like a more famous lover before him, Jock had read somewhere about things that old knights used to do 'for' their ladies—all sorts of out-of-the-way risky things. Not that the ladies always wanted them done, nor that the knights wanted to swank, nor that the things would do any special good to the

ladies, but just because, if you were proper fond, as Jock said, of a young lady, it made you feel better to try to do something you wouldn't have dared to do if you had not been in love. They are often humble sentimentalists at bottom, these big handsome men.

Jock said he ' fair had to ' take on some little bit of a risk or another. The only one that he could think of was to dive into the river some night, in his clothes, from the high railway-bridge a little up stream. Of course it was not much of a risk, anyhow. Still, he didn't swim very well—few watermen did in those days—and the black shine of deep water a long way below him at night had always given him the creeps. And you must take what you can get, and do what you can for your lady. Had I a young lady? And if I had, would I care tc stand in?

I was not in love at the time, but otherwise the proposal quite suited my book. Swimming and diving were hobbies of mine; I couldn't enjoy too often that heavenly downward swoop through thirty feet of the ambrosial air of a midsummer night, into the softly sustaining embrace of the water the June sun had been warming all day. But, for me, it would have to be the next night or never; I was to go North the day after to-morrow, to start my new work, and perhaps I might never come back.

To-morrow night would do champion, said Jock—high tide at nine, to give us a good head of water under the bridge; and a moon pretty near full would be getting up about ten.

' Just after your work, then? ' I said.

' Righto! We knock off at ten.'

' I shall be here,' I promised.

We said good-night. As I was walking away under the chestnuts I could just hear Jock say to himself ' The risin' of

the moon, the risin' of the moon!' in a low voice of absolute ecstasy. As I remember it now, all the romance that there is in the world was in Jock's voice as I heard it at that moment in the animated summer dusk—virility, adventure and the lover's thronging sense of life, the whole of it, as if it must all be a-thrill, through and through, with beauty and wonder.

III

As ignominiously as any of Don Quixote's little projects had ours miscarried. At first all had seemed to go well. The night had been fair, the tide good. It was trespass, of course, to set foot on the railway company's bridge, but the spikes and barbed wire had not beaten us. Once we were up on the railway, we felt the game ours: nothing more to do but guess when we had reached the middle of the centre arch, climb the six-foot iron parapet and dive from its top. And we had all but arrived at our mark, when, out of the streak of deeper darkness under the parapet, two hulking railway policemen rose, one of them with a rasping challenge of 'Well, what are *you* doing here?' I suppose there must have been some sort of bother that we had not heard of—people sneaking across the bridge after dark, it may be, to save fares at the ferry.

Presence of mind is much praised. But it can play you queer tricks. At a crisis it gives you some order so clear that you can't think that there could be any other order to give. And yet, in just the same case, it will give another man a quite different order. Both Jock and I had some presence of mind, in a sense. But to me the order that came was 'Slip them! Get it done! Dive like a shot!' while to Jock it must have been 'Give 'em what for!' Without the slightest notion that anything else could be done I jumped for the top edge of

the parapet with my hands, grabbed it, hauled up my legs out of reach of the law, and dived out into the night. I was falling forward already, the swarthy twinkle of the little eddies below was coming up to meet me, when I heard Jock's voice ringing recklessly 'Why, what the Hell's that to you?' and then the first scrunch and grunt of a big scuffle.

The stream carried me down a good way. It must have been twenty minutes before I had landed, squeezed a little of the water out of my clothes, to run faster, and then torn back to the bridge to cut in if it were not too late.

It was. There was nobody there. If Jock, in the joy of battle, had thrown the enemy into the river, I should have heard the two splashes, and the third splash when Jock went over also, to see that they came by no real harm. But I had heard nothing. I heard nothing now, hungrily as I listened. I ran half a mile up the line—I thought it the likeliest way for justice to have marched a captive. Beyond that point, the railway ran straight for a mile, with the moon, that was now riding high, lighting all of it brightly. There was no figure in sight. I trailed back and searched again at the bridge. At last I slunk off to bed, rather shivery. Next day I went to my job in the North, the beginning of grateful labours that for the forty central years of life have kept me quite absorbedly happy

IV

I don't say that I should have had time to write out all this while the old boat, with the old ferryman in it, was coming across. But there was time to remember it all. The stern of the boat scarcely rippled the glaze of the tarnished mirror over which it was creeping, so feeble and slow were the strokes of the man whose grey head had its back to me as he sculled.

But he had the technique, as the best of these ancient mariners have till they die. The sculls had slipped into the water before you could see that each little rhythmical forward swing of the old fellow's body had ended. So no ounce of effort was lost: the boat glided continuously till its bow grounded quietly on the pebbles, and, weakly and stiffly, the ferryman slipped his frayed sculls and got up, and stood in the old professional style, one foot on board and one ashore, to steady the boat for the fare to step in. I saw his face then.

As you grow old you see most of your friends grow old too. And you don't mind the sight. You take it as part of the game. Besides, the change is so slow that no one of the little steps of it startles you much. But it isn't so with friends of whom you lost sight in your youth. Like friends who died young they have not grown old in your thoughts: the portraits of them that hang on the walls of your mind are of people only just as old as they were when you last saw them. If you meet one of them in the flesh, some forty years on, it may shock you to see how much he has changed. It is as if he had aged forty years in a night.

That was how I felt when I saw that the grey-head was Jock. It wasn't Jock alone that I saw. It was a ghost of myself, of my youth, suddenly risen to show me, in one total sum, how much I must have lost, by little degrees, without noticing it. Or I might put it another way. It was as if I were only twenty again and some cruel god were giving me a glimpse of what must happen in time to the vessel fullest of the eagerness of life and of its uncontainable vehemence—the silver cord fallen loose and the golden bowl broken.

All that remained unmistakable was the shapely main lines of Jock's face and a kind of thoroughbred rightness in the proportions. The lights were all quenched. The rather full

and fiery violet eyes that I remembered were bleached to a limpid and pale forget-me-not blue with no glow behind it. His lips, which had seemed almost to laugh when at rest, were now stitched tightly into the places from which teeth were missing.

I saw he had no recollection of me—did not even take the momentary look at me that every young ferryman takes at a new face. It seemed as if Jock had outlived curiosity. Inertly he pushed the boat clear of the ground, took his seat, spat on his hands and unshipped the frayed sculls. The mole-hill had become a mountain and the grasshopper a burden. ' Been here a long time? ' I asked, trying to play the affable stranger.

' Forty years,' he said impassively, ' last Whitsuntide.' The moment he had spoken, his lips were tightly puckered in again.

' I lived here once,' I said, ' when I was young. I was born over there.' I pointed where my father's house glowed mellowly red among the motionless trees.

' It was a good place then,' he said, but in no tone of regret —just indifference, as it seemed.

I didn't know what to say. So I said ' Do the tugs bring the barges along, the old way, near the top of the tide, and then the teams take them over? '

' Teams? They're gone, these thirty year. You don't see a horse, not twice in a year, on this tow-path.' There was no lament in his voice. He might have been speaking of some old waterway that had gone out of use in the moon.

I forced a good cheerful tone and said ' Anyhow, the old pleasure-boat business keeps up, I suppose? '

' It's nothing now,' he said, ' to what it was. They say it's this new half-tide lock has done it—making all the reach a muck o' mud and shallows. Half the pleasure-boats is gone up

Richmond way, and half keeps down at Hammersmith. They don't come here.'

We were now in mid-river, not far from where I used to fly-fish for dace, standing up to my knees in the river through long, hot holiday mornings of rapturous absorptions. Surely the very bed of the Thames could not have decayed. 'Is the old string of pits still full of dace?' I asked anxiously.

'Them that used to lay along outside the foreshore? Where they dredged the gravel? That lot's silted up, these twenty year. They don't get no good fishing now. It's died away.'

I said in a great hurry, 'Well, I hope this good old ferry does fine, anyhow.'

'Nothing doing,' he said, quite uncomplainingly. 'Not to call anything. All died away. Everythink dies away here.'

The bow was grating on the gravel. My passage was over. But I hadn't begun, really. And this faded semblance of Jock, with the fire extinct in his eyes, was still sitting on the forward thwart, as though he had nothing to move for, all day, if I cared to ask any more questions. So I did begin then—I said,

'Don't you remember me, Jock?'—and it was more an appeal than a question. Even of being forgotten there are degrees, and some of them hurt.

He gave no sign of recognition, nor of living interest; only of polite regret; Jock had always had courtesy.

'I see a many people here,' he explained. 'Leastways I used to.'

'Was there any but one,' I asked—a little reproachfully I am afraid—'that you made up to dive off the bridge with?'

It brought no lustre into the watery blue of his eyes. 'It was that job that done me,' he said, but somehow as if it were all a story about somebody else and no matter to Jock.

'Done you?' I felt something pricking me hard. To what sort of worry and bale had I left him that night?

'They called it trespassing,' he said, 'And assaulting the cops. They gev it me all right, in the police-court. The beak said as it was my first time there he'd let me off with a fine. Forty bob. As if I could have 'alf forty bob in me pocket, and me not in regular work! And so they shoved me in the jug. They cut me hair.'

Even now there was no distress in his voice—only that disquieting apathy. And I had had twice forty bob in my pocket when this Samson, my friend, was shorn for the lack of it! Why on earth had I not thought? Too busy, I suppose, with being happy. I asked ruefully 'You got that job at Spindler's boat-house, that he'd promised you?'

'I asked for it,' he said, 'soon as I come out o' quad. Spindler said the arrangement was off. "I don't require no convic' labour," Spindler said. So I had to stick on at the ferry till I could do better. I been sticking on ever since.'

We sat silent for a few minutes. Somehow the golden day seemed to me to caress Jock's unquerulous face with its luminous and tender mist. Above us, on the tow-path, a few of the brown chestnut leaves came whispering down, and a youth loitered by, whistling. He checked for a moment, perhaps just to stare at the two queer old birds sitting dumb in a boat, face to face. Well, he may have thought, what could anyone have to say at that age, anyhow? He loitered on, whistling again.

'I'm a family man, Jock,' I said. 'Very happily married these thirty-five years. And what about you?'

'Me? I had a young lady. She gev me the go when I'd been in the jug. "I'm not having a husband," she says, "as has slep' on the boards." So she gev me the go.' Jock didn't add

that it was for her he had risked the plank bedding, any more than he had hinted that I might perhaps have come to his aid.

I sat wondering at him. I had not seen any containment like his. Was it by the sheer force of a stoical will that he kept down every whine of self-pity that any common person like me would have uttered while raking the little heap of cold ashes, left to him by the spent fires of his passionate youth? Or had Jock passed into some curious insensible state of the mind, a sort of opiate ante-chamber of death, a state in which a man's frustrated life, his lost strength and beauty of body and spirit and all the thwarted love and aspiration of his starved heart may matter no more in his own sight than some sad doings in some remote star? I wondered.

We couldn't sit there all the day. And it was I who must make the move somehow, and try to say the right word, though I could think of nothing but the pity of it and the waste and the way that May-flies and men are given just the one chance and then are utterly done with. I said pretty lamely, 'They were great days.'

The hand that I shook, while I spoke, was a very old man's. For a moment I thought it began to press mine with the warmth of a friend's, while he said, 'Aye, I felt like as if I could break the world in them days.' But then his hand went slack and he seemed to draw off again into his own dim seclusion. 'There ain't no use o' crying, is there, Sir?' he said.

I winced at the 'Sir.' It held me away from him, as it were with a stretched arm. So I walked away under the yellow chestnuts, wondering still. Were regrets, those insatiable vultures, still gnawing his liver? Or had they devoured it all—used him up as a bearer of pain and then let him go, a pithed insensible creature, out of reach of all torment or joy? I am wondering now.

A PRETTY LITTLE PROPERTY

I

YOU will find that almost every ferry across the Thames is somebody's old-world estate, and as sacred as Belvoir or Chatsworth. If someone else sculled you across for your penny the institution of property would totter, at any rate in principle. Presently we might see our own savings wolfed and the sceptre laid in the dust.

Still, a new ruby-mine may be found, even now, and a new Thames ferry may be born. A violent rash of new villas may break out on one bank of the stream, while the nearest railway station remains on the other. There may be no bridge—or only a railway bridge—anywhere handy. And possibly that reach of the river may not be within the preserves of the next ferry up or down stream. And then a piercing mind, lodged in some licensed waterman who possesses a boat, may see that there is money in taking people across. That's how a new ferry is born. It is called a free ferry. Not that you don't pay your penny. You do. But any waterman is free to earn it.

The reality of this freedom was tried pretty high within a week after the day when it struck Jimmy Sands, of Gistleham Wharf, that a bit might be made by linking the new villa stronghold of St. Chad's, on the Middlesex side, with the Surrey-side shops and station of Shean. Other work had failed Jimmy of late. He was seventy-two. People fancied he must be getting infirm. But he wasn't. His stocky, rectangular body was a bit stiff, and his square mahogany face was—if such a thing could be—more completely devoid of expression than ever, now that his lips were sucked in so tightly over his empty gums. But he could still scull his own hulking boat,

with sculls like the sweeps of a small barge, for any length of time required by his interests, which were very dear to him. Between journeys Jimmy would stand in the rain like a tree, rooted to one place, as if rain were no worse than anything else.

It was eight on a Monday morning when Jimmy struck gold, a little below the St. Chad's railway bridge. That day he took seven and ninepence. On Tuesday, when more people knew he was there, he cleared a cool twelve shillings. You would never have guessed it from his face. No jubilation for Jimmy, no psalmody of thanks or praise. Mr. Vygoe, the company-floater, on his way home to St. Chad's from the City, said archly to Jimmy: 'Nice little property this you've got—what?' But Jimmy only grunted darkly, like a farmer who is accused of having experienced good weather. Jimmy was a man of the world, and Mr. Vygoe respected him for it.

But no auriferous secret lasts long. At eight on Wednesday morning Micky Devine, of Old Shean, and Ponto Willis, of Gistleham, were on the spot, each with a boat.

A short debate followed. I don't say Jimmy commanded the all-round technique of Cicero or Demosthenes. From what we hear, the faces of these masters must have had some expression. But Jimmy did pretty well. His verve, his unreserve were in the great style that was theirs. Without emitting one ray of expression from his timber face, he let Micky and Ponto have it in a cold, level stream that had an immense momentum of its own. The turpitude of sneaking another bloke's pitch and the blithering idiocy of supposing that there was money in it for three bleeders were treated with a kind of statuesque vivacity difficult to describe.

Micky and Ponto squirmed with genuine agonies of shame. But only internally—in their souls. For employment

was bad, and a man must live. And hadn't they their rights, same as the old 'un? So—externally, with their bodies and tongues—they stayed where they were and desired the old 'un to go home and boil himself.

Jimmy declined. So, from that time forth, every customer had to be contended for. He was the prize in a tournament of eloquence. 'Stick to the Old Firm' was the slogan of Jimmy, or 'Support the Old-established Ferry.' And, mind you, that told. 'Give a young un a chance,' Ponto pleaded. And that told too. Micky used less rhetoric proper. But he was good-looking and he had a way with him. He soon built up a very fair practice among the younger women.

The tide of traffic set towards Shean all the morning. Therefore they all kept their boats on the St. Chad's side. When a stray hail did come from the other side, Micky and Ponto flung themselves aboard their craft and raced across for the penny. Jimmy didn't. Knowing himself, like the philosopher that he was, he knew he had no turn of speed. That goes with youth. Nor was Jimmy's barge a flyer. Still, he netted an undisputed fare from St. Chad's now and then while the young bloods were away sprinting.

The observant Vygoe was one of these gifts of the gods. 'Bit o' competition—what!' he said while Jimmy was sculling him over.

Jimmy worked his toothless jaws for a while, as if he had heard nothing. Then he spat over the gunwale. At last he said 'Bit o' scum.'

'Well, what are you doing about it?' Vygoe inquired. 'Rate-cutting—what? A farthing fare? Freeze 'em out—what, what?'

These big-business idioms stumped Jimmy. But never in a long life had Jimmy let on that he was stumped. He spat

impassively, two or three times, as the Sphinx would spit if she could. He then said, ' I don't take no notice o' them.'

' Why not pool? ' said Vygoe. ' Make a handy little Trust of it—what? Where's the sense o' sweating out your guts like this for nothing—what, what? '

Jimmy fancied that he got the hang of these observations. He said no more at the moment, however. He only thought deeply.

That was an arduous day, as Vygoe had said more coarsely. About noon the drift of traffic towards Shean fell away. Only an odd fare appeared now and then, now on one bank and then on the other. So Micky and Ponto had a good bellyful of boat-racing while Jimmy stuck to the Middlesex bank and trusted his lone star. But about five o'clock there set in a violent current of City men and their clerks, homing to St. Chad's.

For a time the three rivals simply stood by the bows of their boats, on the Shean shore, hallooing for custom like bookies on a course. Then Micky perceived that on this male public the lure of his beauty was exercised in vain. So he began to make raids up the lane that led to Shean Station, in order to intercept custom nearer its source. From these forays he returned conducting little groups of captives—sometimes bearing aloft on his shoulders a small boy or girl, a tender hostage for the fidelity of its parent to Micky's boat.

In business there often arise new and perhaps odious forms of competition which no business man, whatever his private feelings, can afford to leave wholly to his competitors. In half an hour the three were all touting for custom a good third of a mile away from their base. But Jimmy was not liking it. Jimmy was essentially a maritime or riverain Power. He felt, in his bones, that in these land operations he was predestined to be ineffective. He hated stirring his stumps. He hated

playing the courtier. He could never have got into Parliament. He was too massive and rugged a 'character-part.' The longer he went on accosting startled adults, far inland, and shouldering reluctant brats, the more deeply did he think of what Vygoe had said.

II

At nine that night an armistice was declared and the theatre of war was simultaneously evacuated by all the triumvirs. Excess of speech and emotion had wearied them. And public-houses did not keep open all night, even before the War came.

In fares—apart from those uncovenanted and incalculable mercies, tips—the three had earned on the day a grand total of sixteen and threepence. Jimmy, the old, the sage, led the field with six bob. No one had divined so intuitively as he the set of the minor currents of trade. The fair Micky had cleared five and fourpence. Ponto, for all his speed in the cross-river racing, had fallen just short of the five-shilling mark. But even four and eleven is four and eleven. For four and eleven many drapers offer you anything in their windows.

Success will out, sure as murder, especially at Gistleham, in the private bar of the 'London Apprentice.' At eight next morning two more boats accrued to the fleet at the ferry, and Jimmy, Ponto and Micky underwent the change that affects the sitting tenants of a full compartment of a train when other passengers get in. Hitherto the occupants may have disliked one another. But now they see, in a flash, who the real Thugs are. The warfare of yesterday instantly took the new form of a struggle between two powerful leagues. Prodigies of damaging innuendo were achieved by the Triple Alliance of Jimmy, Ponto and Mick. If Dubber and Broad, the two new fortune-seekers, had both been lepers, and their boats

coffin-ships, the public could scarcely have been more alarmingly warned. Dubber and Broad, in return, took their own part with some spirit. 'Come where you'll get all your change'; 'Give British labour a turn'; ''Ave a boat that isn't 'opping with fleas'; in war the best form of defensive is the offensive, and such were the defensive tactics of Dubber and Broad.

Friday, in turn, brought its new draft of kill-joys. So did Saturday. So did Sunday itself. On Monday, a week from the day Jimmy had founded the ferry, there were twenty-one men on the job. There the pestilence was stayed. No other brother of the craft appeared on Tuesday.

III

It was time. There was just about a guinea a day in that ferry, now that it was known. It yielded each of the twenty-one a shilling a day, like being a soldier. All of them were on duty for thirteen hours a day, without any fixed meal-times, on seven days in the week. Each was a capitalist, for each had a boat, and the whole of his capital was involved, quite uninsured, and was depreciating steadily. It wasn't business. And Jimmy saw it.

'Well, wot about it?' he began, quite suddenly, one warm afternoon when traffic was slack. The others were standing about, watching one another, all of them well within hearing.

All stared at Jimmy, amazed. That their *doyen* should break into speech, without almost physical necessity, was a portent in itself. 'Wot about wot?' Dubber asked with awe in his voice.

'This 'ere,' said Jimmy. A slight lurch of his head was rightly understood by them all to indicate the local situation

as a whole. They drew nearer. Jimmy went on: 'Wot's to stop us whacking this job out in lays? One man a day. 'Im to do the work and take the money. All the rest—keep out of it. Nex' day—nex' man come on. Same for 'im. Then the nex'. Fair do all round. One day o' work in three weeks an' make the same money as wot we do now.'

It is the fate of vast reforms to begin by appalling many minds. Jimmy's programme of revolution drew cries of horror. 'Wot!' shouted Ponto. ''Ave some swab lettin' the property down! An' we not 'ere to protec' it!' Ponto gave a basilisk glance at the dregs of the company—that is, the ones who had joined it last.

Dubber amplified Ponto's suggestion. 'Aye! Boozed on duty! Givin' good customers lip!'

'And what in the world,' added Micky, 'would anny man do with himself, doing nothing for twenty long days in every three weeks?'

'Ah—and attemp'in',' said Broad, 'to keep a hold on the small end of his guinea! You been talkin' to Mr. Vygoe agen, Pa, thet's what's the matter wi' you.'

'I don't take no notice of '*im*,' the perjured Jimmy said dismissively. But he saw he was beaten. They all rather liked him. One does like these good meaty character-parts. So they tried to say 'No' nicely. They said, ''Ave a bit o' sense, Jimmy' in a quite friendly way, or 'Not goin' balmy, old un, are you?' Still, 'No' it was.

Jimmy digested it for a couple of days before he evinced the English genius for compromise. Then he simply proposed that they should all stay on at the ferry, but take turns at the spoil—toss up for order of going in and then each take a fare in his turn. All but the man next for duty could then gamble in peace. Just after your own turn had come you could

even step up to the 'Merry Mouth' for a glass, without loss.

The old statesman carried this measure by the sagacious device of bringing it up, as it were, by the way—they might take it or leave it—he didn't care. So each of them felt as if he had proposed it himself, and that made them like it and not suspect it. And soon there was no doubt that it had given a lift to riverside civilisation. Born Conservatives like Ponto and Dubber admitted that there were points about taking your ease in your boat, playing Anchor or Bank with your peers, only raising your head now and again to shout 'Forward' or 'Shop' to the next duty man, at sight of an approaching customer. No need now to practise the slave virtue of obligingness; none of the old canine speeding at the beck and call of any passing riff-raff. Hails from the other side could now be answered with dignity and deliberation, and 'Thenk you, mum' and even 'Ta' could be left out if only the bare penny were slipped into your palm. The supreme taciturnity and surliness of Jimmy at this happier epoch won him further respect from Mr. Vygoe. The Olympian quality of you-be-damnedness, with its possible symptomatic importance, is not undervalued in the City.

IV

This Vygoe was a dapper card of sixty, thickly studded with primary tokens of solvency—spats, a gold-rimmed eye-glass, cigars of the best, a jaunty manner and a white hat and waistcoat whenever the weather did not absolutely forbid them. He carried his head with a list to starboard, like the alert sparrow that he was. In thanksgiving for temporal blessings lately received in the E.C. postal district of London

he had just given the new parish of St. Chad's a church of atrocious appearance, called by his friends V's Fire Insurance. Their joke was an old one.

Vygoe himself was something almost new in his time. In the wild world of finance he had pegged out a wild little claim of his own. He lived to carry to unexplored lengths the democratisation of limited liability. Others might fuse groups of large businesses into combines still more megalosaurian, or help suffering peers to dodge the death duties. Not Vygoe. With every fibre of his being he loved a little, a very little joint-stock company that simply draws its breath, like the Wordsworthian child, and does not know that it is as good as born dead. Vygoe spawned these 'minor industrials' with the copiousness of a she-fish. He loved to feel that no laundry, no hair-dressing saloon, no beer-house free from brewer was too tiny to be led along the primrose-path—you had only to keep everything in proportion. Admiring friends called him the champion dwarf guinea-pig breeder.

Don't think that he was a mere bird of prey. He may have been that before. But by this time he was like a vulture turned humorist, almost artist. Or you might say that now, having sold to the public some scores of the smallest and skinniest pups ever seen, it piqued him to outdo himself and sell to the same purchasers a truly infinitesimal pup, a pup almost invisible to the naked eye. Yes, he would float this fool ferry itself as a limited company. He would make the habitual bit for himself and he would get these poor devils out of their scrape. He was not an ill-natured man.

'You must be getting on—what?' he began as Jimmy sculled him across. 'Ever think of parting with this little business—what? Retiring? Selling out of it and living on your dividends—what, what?'

Jimmy spat twice, with a natural interval between, before he said, 'Whose leg do you think you're a-pulling?'

Vygoe knew that, from Jimmy, this was not at all a bad first reception for the idea. He pursued: 'You might sell it for hundreds—what?—thousands perhaps. To investors, you know—to a company—what? Only wants a little timing—work a boom month, see?—sell on top o' that—what? Just you talk it over with your partners—what?—what?'

Jimmy heaved his head half round, in the direction of the twenty boats decomposing on the Middlesex shore. 'Me partners?' he said. 'Them ticks! Wot they got to do with it?'

'It's all or none, Jimmy,' said Vygoe. 'You just sound 'em—what? Ask 'em have they any use for a few hundred pound.'

For the rest of that voyage across, Jimmy grunted 'Me partners!' at short intervals, in a tone of disgust. But Vygoe fancied that the seed was germinating well in the dark.

V

If you are a racing man you may remember the mess there was, that year, on the first day of the Ailsa Park summer meeting. Half the turf world goes to Ailsa by road, over the old bridge at Shean, about half a mile above Jimmy's ferry. From the bridge it is only two miles to the course. But about nine on that morning, of all others, a big and ominous-looking crack was found to have opened itself in the middle arch of the bridge.

The borough surveyor of Shean was invoked. As soon as he looked at the crack he said the bridge might drop into the river at any time. So all traffic was instantly stopped and the bridge was barricaded.

All London, however, could not be told of this in a moment. By noon an endless column of motor cars was setting down in the quaint streets of Shean a mixed multitude of bookies and backers, lions and lambs, united in consternation. For the silver Thames flowed deep between them all and the common objective.

Resourceful souls parked their cars and rushed to look for a ferry. From the further shore Jimmy and his 'partners' heard of a sudden the tramp, as it seemed, of thousands in the lane leading from Shean. The twenty-one had already got word of the crack and had hoped that good might come of it. But they had not grasped yet the full size of the glorious truth —that the crack had made every man of them a St. Peter holding a key to the Heaven of the day, and of the three following days.

Like one boat the entire flotilla sped across the river to grasp the voluminous skirts of this happy chance. As it sped it suspended the standing orders, *nem. con.* It raised the fare from a penny to sixpence. It gave every man a dispensation to take every passenger his boat would hold.

In a long life Father Thames had seen few such harvests reaped on his bosom. The day was young. No backer had lost money yet. Even the welshers had some money on them. Many large-hearted sportsmen gave a shilling apiece without pressure. Five, seven, even ten shillings a journey were taken—the size of a man's boat was the only limit to his earnings. And, sculled they never so swiftly, the twenty-one could scarcely make any impression, for quite a long time, on the queue waiting on the Shean side. The only danger was lest the passionate creatures should swim.

In the late afternoon there did come a short lull. The ferrymen had time to distribute their loads of bullion more

conveniently about their persons. One or two ran up the lane to the 'Merry Mouth' to get gold in exchange for the baser metals, for lightness' sake. There was gold in England in those days. But, even then, there was more than the usual non-racing traffic to cope with, thanks to God's gift of the crack. And, as soon as the last race was run, the Ailsa tide began to ebb as furiously as it had flowed, and each of the bevy of male Danaes at the ferry was re-ravished with a fresh shower of coin.

Throughout the bewitching experience a becoming reserve was maintained by the darlings of the gods. 'How doin', Dub?' Ponto inquired; and Dubber said, 'Addled a brown or two. Ow's all, yourself?' and Ponto said, 'Nuffin' to shout about.' There is a form in these things, Madam, there is a form, as the lady of quality said in the story.

In the same spirit Jimmy's face remained blank when Mr. Vygoe winked at him and talked about bull points and selling at the peak while Jimmy sculled him across in the relative calm of late evening. 'Don't go and get left—what?' said Vygoe. 'Sell while you can. You're not for all markets—what?—what?'

'Wojja mean?' Jimmy asked at his leisure.

'That old crack won't keep for ever—what? There's more you've got to think of, too.'

Jimmy considered majestically. Then he repeated himself: 'Wojja mean?'

'Know how to keep a secret?' Vygoe almost whispered.

Jimmy's scorn for leaky vessels was sublime. 'Do I know 'ow to keep a secret!'

'You do?—what? Well, just keep this, and use it for your good. A very old friend of mine, on the Thames Conservancy gave me a good tip last night. They've just fixed it up with

the railway to tack a light foot-bridge on to this railway-bridge—over your heads pretty nearly. No toll, either—what? An open bridge. And where will you be then, with your old ferry—what? Round the corner, up the spout—what, what? '

With some remains of aplomb Jimmy said ' Gowan, you're kiddin'.' But the psychologist in the stern sheets could see that he had got his man perturbed. When the boat's bow touched land, Jimmy did not ship his sculls at once, as usual. He leant forward, over them, staring at Vygoe, and asked, for the third time, ' Wojja mean? '

Vygoe, too, leant forward confidentially. ' See here,' he whispered. ' You men here have got a damn good thing—to get out of. What's more, a first-class miracle has made it a top-hole thing to sell. Why, it's so good you'll all live happy ever after and not need to do a stroke of work—what? What follows? Sell it! Sell it quick! I'll help you sell it if you like —what?—what? '

Over Jimmy's mind a rosy dawn was breaking. When it had gone pretty far he gave Vygoe a slow and enormous wink like the descent and re-ascent of the fire-proof curtain in a theatre.

VI

Before the boom days the destined profiteers had put up a little hut for themselves on the strip of waste grass between the tow-path and the foreshore. Its material was old biscuit-tins and soap-boxes. Its architectural style was as Perpendicular as they could get it to stand. It just held them all, sitting close, and it kept out some of the rain. It had survived so far because the Thames Police can't always have their eyes everywhere. A trespass or nuisance may go on unnoticed for

months. This one was named Doggett Hall, to the glory of Thomas Doggett, who is the St. Hubert of the sport of professional sculling.

It was in this dedicated building that Vygoe talked business, late one evening, to the assembled twenty-one. Jimmy had been ground-baiting the pitch for a couple of days, and now Vygoe fished. He got frankly down to the root of the matter. Every business on earth, he explained, was the same as a pig. You had to get 'em small, fatten 'em up, and then off with you to market. You'd never get rich by keeping a good sucking-pig till it died of old age. The one wise and right thing to do was firmly to part with the beast at the one golden moment when it was in tip-top fettle for selling.

'Well, gentlemen,' Vygoe went on, with deep feeling, 'your golden moment has come. You have in your hands a young pig, so to speak, as evenly fed as ever I saw. I think I may say that there isn't a gentleman here but is taking at this moment his four pound a day.'

One or two men said, 'Nothing near it!' But this negative was so obviously a formal or decorative precaution that Vygoe could ignore it. Another said, 'Ah, but 'ow long will it last?'

That was what Vygoe wanted. He snapped at it. 'That's it!' he cried. 'Will it last? Not it! Nothing lasts. A pig won't last. A pear won't last. I'm told the sun won't last. The same with everything—all up and up to the peak, and then down and down. And now's your peak, and you know why. Now's your chance to sell. Mind you, it isn't a case of a pound or two. It will run into hundreds and hundreds.'

Somebody jeered: 'Wot's a hundred among twenty-one?' But he was suppressed with grunts of 'Cheese it!' 'Order, there!' 'Shut your face' and so forth.

'Hundreds and hundreds,' Vygoe solemnly resumed, 'for

each and every gentleman here. Nay, more. I see my way to a secure permanent income of more than four pounds a week, without work, for evervone here, and a fortune to leave to his heirs. Does it attract you at all? '

It did. But they had a misgiving. Where did Vygoe come in? What was he out to get from all this? For they really wanted him to get something. Unless they knew where his bit would be made they would feel all at sea: they might even be up against pure upper-class philanthropy, a thing profoundly suspect among men of their kind as a sort of malarious pasture fit to be grazed only by the mean and the mangy.

With great vigour Vygoe cleared himself of this suspicion. Good Lord! no!—he wasn't, he pleaded, one of these goody freaks that go about messing up poor people's lives for the good of their own blessed souls. He wanted ten per cent, one quid in every ten, just that, of whatever price he could get them for the whole outfit. And that price would come up to them, for them to take it or leave it, perfectly freely, before any deal could be done.

They were amazed at such moderation. Going halves was the only sort of commission they knew. Still, the tithe sufficed: it absolved Vygoe of any taint of abnormality. They did not wholly discard the distrustful expression which is the armour of innocent souls on market-days. But they authorised the magician to get on with his miracle.

VII

The magician went home elated. And, late as it was, he never closed eye till he had drafted the prospectus of the new Thames Ferries Corporation Limited.

The first clause of this essay was almost baldly statistical.

It set forth that the Corporation was formed to combine into one undertaking no fewer than twenty-one of the chief ferry-boats linking the banks of the Thames between Oxford and the Tower of London. Such ferries had been, from time immemorial, sources of a wealth scarcely realised by the public. For example, during a typical week of the current year, none of the twenty-one properties to be acquired by the Corporation had earned less than four pounds on any one day. The average earnings of each for the week exceeded £32. On this basis £1500 a year was an extremely conservative estimate of the average yearly takings of each business. In other words the gross annual revenue in prospect greatly exceeded £30,000 a year. There was every reason to hope that, under modernised and scientific management, the whole of this powerful group of concerns would enjoy a steady gross revenue ranging from £40,000 to £50,000 a year.

On the side of expenditure, labour costs were low, the staff efficient and devoted, and the fleet of boats to be acquired were in first-rate condition and in the highest degree suitable to their functions.

As to the vendors' title etc., the legal title to almost every ferry on the Thames was involved in the mists of antiquity, but in none of the cases now in view had the owner's right of ferry ever been questioned. Without technical documentary proof it was nevertheless so enshrined in the memory of the neighbourhood as to be wholly indefeasible.

A shrewd eye was then cast upon the expansion and smiling future of St. Chad's, the ever-growing popularity of the meetings at Ailsa Park, and the imminent opening of a new league football ground at Hesterley, in the hinterland of St. Chad's.

Only at this point, when justice had been done to the bare

facts of the case, did Vygoe let himself go and turn downright lyrical. He appealed to something even higher than a firm expectation of good dividends. Here, he explained, was a chance to make yourself an integral part of one of the most venerable and romantic of English crafts—an institution positively garlanded, festooned, with historical and artistic associations; consecrated, times out of mind, by the genius of British artists on the walls of the Royal Academy, and celebrated by our poets in the deathless strains of 'Haste to the Ferry,' 'The Jolly Young Waterman,' 'Twickenham Ferry' and, in the Scottish dialect, 'Fu' loud the wind blaws frae the ferry.' To secure a personal share, or shares, in so sturdy and picturesque a survival of the Spacious Days of Merrie England was much the same thing as possessing a feudal estate mentioned in Domesday. It would place a man, or a woman, on the same level as Lords of the Marches, Rangers of Windsor Forest and Wardens of the Cinque Ports.

To satisfy this honourable ambition the public were to be permitted to subscribe for £150,000 of Ordinary Shares. The directors, almost all of them gentlemen personally concerned in the management of the chief properties to be acquired, were Lord Swyllerton (Chairman), James Goodwin Sands, Esq., Michael John Devine, Esq., Pontus Willis, Esq., and Samuel Dubber Tench, Esq. The registered office was at Doggett Hall, St. Chad's, Middlesex.

VIII

When Vygoe read out this fantasia to 'the vendors,' they could almost have owned that the pen was mightier than the scull. Visions of cinema Heavens opened before them. Then the haunting consciousness of being plain men in a wicked

world came back to prompt some home questions. For one thing, how much would each of them get?

Vygoe was ready for that. 'Six thousand down, every man.'

To his hearers the figure was one of geologic or astronomic immensity. It dazzled the mind. It defied all practical conception in terms of house-rent, clothes, beer or tobacco. So they sat quite still for a while and tried to let it sink in, and meanwhile they were visited by the workman's soul-freezing fear of losing his job. Would they have to 'off it,' they asked. Must they part with their boats?

Vygoe was ready again. 'Not a bit of it. Any man who likes can stay. He can scull his own boat, in the Corporation's employment, at wages fixed by the directors. And that's you, you know, gentlemen.' Vygoe smiled sweetly.

That seemed good enough. Only one apprehension remained. A good supply of 'mugs,' or credulous persons, would clearly be needed, for the millennium to arrive. What, Dubber asked, if some mug were to come nosing round? Mightn't he see there was 'no ferry, only the one,' and that free—and that the fleet was all rotten planks gummed together with red-lead and tar? What if he gave them in charge?—got them all lagged, perhaps, for trying to pull off a ramp?

Vygoe laughed at these innocent tremors. Why, as things went nowadays, it was a very honest flotation indeed. If only every new company started in life with assets as solid as twenty-one boats that would float and twenty-one pairs of sculls! No, let them be serious. The only practical point was whether, the day the new foot-bridge was opened, they would go home with six thousand apiece in their pockets, or with nothing at all.

At this point Jimmy broke the silence and said Mr. Vygoe had put the case in a nut-shell. Ponto added that Mr. Vygoe

had hit the nail on the head. Dubber said the die was cast. These sterling phrases acted like incantations on the rest. Discussion was over, Vygoe got his authority, and in a week the hunt for the hundred and fifty thousand was up.

In this chase the line followed by hounds lay chiefly in Yorkshire and Lancashire. If anything can lend enchantment to the view of a decrepit armada of ferry-boats, it is distance. So the thing was floated in the North, where trade was doing well at the time and good money was going up and down in the streets, bleating for somebody to devour it. Within a month the whole of the shares were subscribed for. In another month the cash was paid up and each of the twenty-one vendors had his six thousand, and Vygoe his fifteen, as well as some little savings out of the nine thousand earmarked to defray the incidental expenses of flotation.

IX

And yet, so mercifully are our destinies ruled, no mug was a penny the worse for it all. In another six weeks the Great War was raging munificently. A training camp for recruits was plumped down in some wet meadows close to St. Chad's, and it was felt in high places, that the brave lads must have proper means of access, in their few hours of leisure, to the pubs and movies of Shean. For this national purpose a mere privately owned ferry was soon perceived to be quite out of place. 'We must take the whole caboodle over at once,' said a trenchant person lovely with ribbons and seated in a good chair in Whitehall.

The generous passion for not spoiling ships for ha'porths of tar can have seldom gone to greater lengths than it did in those days. The mere bodily act of handing out large bags

of public money in return for inconsiderable things seemed to raise a noble glow in the hearts of exalted cashiers. They must have felt as if it were their own blood, to be shed with a light heart for their endangered country. Theirs not to reason why. If there was not much to show for the money, still it was a grand gesture, a kind of wide sweep of a magnificent and careless arm. Its effects still live to tell us that in the day of trial there were gallant hearts that would not pare cheese.

In this lofty mood did some great soul, in uniform, tick off each item of the Thames Ferries Corporation's claim for compensation for the surrender of its entire assets and goodwill. Share capital, £150,000—yes; gross annual takings, £31,500—yes; net annual profit £30,000 a year—yes. 'Seems all right,' said this passionate loosener of purse-strings. He boggled a little at the Corporation's demand for £20,000 extra on account of forced purchase. But then he remembered once more the ship and the ha'porth of tar. So he marked the claim 'Approved,' with his initials, and sent it along for confirmation by some still more illustrious stimulator of the lapse of coin.

The claim reached this mandarin just as an ornament of the War Cabinet was leaving the room, after saying incisively, 'We shall never keep up the *moral* of this undisciplined nation of ours if we are to be stingy about little things—little things to you or to me, but things that come right home to the plain man's business and bosom.'

The mandarin was impressed by this piece of eloquence. It sounded, to him, like knowledge of the world. And this claim that had just been laid on his desk looked like a business-and-bosom affair. So he too wrote 'Approved' at its foot. After that, the paying out of the £170,000 was mere child's play.

Clerks and bankers did it easily. You could have done it yourself, in their places.

Jimmy was not made a peer, like so many fundamentally similar heroes of the War. Still, he had done his part: he had called the whole British people up to be taxed for his good. Whatever the scale of their several operations, of no khaki cloth-dealer or bully-beef King can it be said more fairly that England's National Debt is his monument, more lasting than brass.

THE GREAT SCULLING RACE

I

NOBODY can easily believe that the winds of emotion ever blew quite such great guns in the heart of his father, or of his uncle, as they have done in his own. We hear of grand passions in the old days, and of grand smashes that came of them—how somebody was so moved that he threw his cap right over the moon or wrecked a whole town for love of one little baggage like Helen. All very well—but—but our own selves are the most remarkable ones that we know, and even we think twice before we cut dashes like that.

Besides—just look at those old boys—even the modern ones, almost alive to this day: see their photos in old albums; see those of the men they made heroes of; see the good ladies, their flames. Was this a face to launch a thousand ships? And oh! the phlegm of that other one. And the men's bowler hats! Could such fires as scorch your own bosom have really burned under those droll extinguishers?

So you will have to make a big effort. Bend up every muscle and nerve of your imagination. Conceive yourself back in the distant 'eighties. Plant yourself in one of the many oldish public-houses that still look out on the Thames between the Putney 'Star and Garter' and the 'Ship' at Mortlake. Plunge into the bitter gloom in which you would then have found yourself involved by the total eclipse of English professional sculling.

Gone—quite lately gone—were the days when the only question had been whether Thames or Tyne should supply the next champion of the world. To-day Americans, Canadians,

Australians, were racing one another over the great English course for that palm of palms. Probably Parthians, Medes and Elamites next, we said in the bitterness of our hearts. Only once, in those years of bondage, had any Englishman dared to go in. And then he had not been merely beaten. He had been foully shamed. The unknightly varlet who won had played beastly cat's tricks with the poor British mouse—had taken a long lead and then had backed down to abreast of the victim, to give him again the pang of defeat—had then ceased sculling and stood on his own head in his boat till the poor devil struggled up level, just to be beaten once more. Men of all the riverside castes—watermen, boat-builders, lightermen, dredgers of gravel, punt fishermen, amateur oarsmen and miscellaneous 'sports'—recalled the lost glories of Albion, over their evening beer, as the Israelites—well, perhaps the Israelites by the waters of Babylon *may* have pined as intensely for the old life on the Jordan.

II

The usual Jeremiads were flowing more than usually free in the bar of the 'Jolly Waterman'—Oh! the sad irony of the name!—close to the tow-path at Barnes on the night of the September day when Beach, the Parramatta blacksmith, beat the Black Brunswicker, Wallace Ross. England had had no part in the day's business, except looking on.

Sorrow has always been a thirsty function of the soul and the body. So Pa Tench, the landlord, was giving a strong lead in the direction of despair, for the good of the house. To do this he was highly qualified. Now in the flower of middle age, Pa had been a man of distinguished melancholy for the twenty-two years since the day when he might have won Doggett's

Coat and Badge if he had not rammed a pier of Waterloo Bridge with the tender nose of his boat in the course of the race. Pa had never concealed from his friends the nearness of that approach of his to greatness. Had he won, some rich patron of the sport would surely, he said, have found the money to give Pa a try for the championship. Then Harry Kelley himself might have quaked. As a man of blighted life, and a champion lost to the world, Pa was heard with respect when he diagnosed the disease that was now eating into the vitals of the sport. 'Wot English sculling wants,' he said, 'is loyal an' courageous backers. Men as will put down a stake of five 'undred pound, an' all training expenses, to give a lad as shows talent a start in the world. Don't I know 'ow it takes the 'eart out of a promising lad—not 'avin' backers?' With a tragic wave of the arm Pa pointed to the dreadful past.

There was a sympathetic murmur. 'Thet's right. No sportin' spirit!' said Dick Redwell. A local tradesman, reputed to have money, Dick was known to his intimates as The Little 'Arf-Pint because of his unpretentious custom of accepting treat with the formula 'Well, I don't so much mind if I do 'ave a little 'arf-pint.' 'No sportin' spirit—'igh or low. Only th' other dye I was a-lookin' at the 'orses in 'Yde Park an' a little shabby feller comes up an' 'e says to me, "Rotten lott'ry, this life, 'yn't it?" 'e says. "I wish it was," I says. 'Course I wasn' tikin' no notice of '*im.* "Wot?" 'e says, "an' all these bleeders drawrin' tickets to set on a 'orse an' 'ave a good cigar in their fice, an' you an' me drawrin' tickets to stan' 'ere an' slive in the mud!" "You jus' thenk Gawd," I says, "as there's any winners to drawr." 'Course I wasn' tikin' no notice of 'im, only tellin' 'im.'

'Wot's all thet to do wi' scullin'?' put in Jemmy Burton. He was a merely occasional customer of the house. Pa's more regular clients knew little of Jemmy and did not much like what they knew. He had a pose, a fixed manner. And it was a devastatory one. His line was that of the conscious pricker of everyone else's nice little bubbles of rhetoric, a cooler-down of other people's hot air, a blower-away of eloquent froth. This roused in any common and natural man his proper instinct of self-defence against clear thinkers and precise logicians, with their abominable setting-up of standards too exacting for human nature's comfortable daily use.

So it was with a sense of having the whole company behind him that the 'Arf-Pint began a reply so stately as to be almost a rebuke. 'The p'int is this—'Ow's English scullin' ever to be better'n wot it is, so long as people won't 'arf bet on it? Where'd 'orse-ricin' be if people lef' off bettin'? Wot about the Ring? Ah, an' coursin'. It's the little flutter keeps 'em all alive and growin'.'

'Thet's right,' Pa pronounced.

On went the Little 'Arf-Pint in a triumphal march of certitude. 'An' why's scullin' orf colour? 'Cause there y'nt no little flutter. Folk 'aven't bet on scullin', not for fifteen year. Lorst the 'abit. Sime as if your blood took an' lorst the 'abit o' movin'. You'd be pretty soon orf colour, too. An' y'nt bettin' the life-blood o' sport? Gawd, yuss!'

'Thet's a nice flow o' words you got to your mouth,' Jemmy rejoined composedly, with a maddening smile that he had for such times. 'But wot are you *doin'* about it? Thet's the p'int, Mr. Little 'Arf-Pint. Wot are you doin'?'

'Mean to sye,' said Dick, with his shoulders growing extraordinarily square, 'that my acts yn't up to me words?'

'I mean to say it's up to you to prove it—now you got a chance.'

'Wojjer mean?' the 'Arf-Pint almost gasped.

Pa too had pricked up his ears. 'Chawnce! Wot chawnce?' he demanded.

'Well,' said Jemmy, ''ow'd yer like to put a bit on Orris Dubber, now e's got a match?'

'Wot's that 'e says?' 'Ol' Dubber got a match?' ''Oo with?' 'Garn 'ome!' These and other cries of amazement came from every part of the bar.

Jemmy held up his news for a moment, to make everyone hang on his lips. Then he let on. It seemed that, after certain private negotiations, articles had been signed at Anderton's Hotel, that very afternoon, for Dubber, of Putney, known as The Only 'Ope, to scull Larry Mack, of Australia, from Putney to Mortlake on that day three months, for a purse of sovereigns, a belt, and stakes of two hundred and fifty a side.

It took away everyone's breath. Had the long lane come to a turning at last? Could Old England's sculling be on the up grade? It looked as if somebody's faith in it were. ''Oo finds the money for Dubber?' Pa inquired coldly —he did not like having to ask a customer for the chief news of the day; it was rather for him, Pa, to give out such news.

'A Mr. Nugent, I'm told,' Jemmy said.

'Not Paddy Nugent of the "Gol' Fish," Richmond 'Ill?'

'Thet's right,' said Jemmy.

Pa, the old cynic, turned up the whites of his eyes, as if the name had been Beelzebub's own. 'An' 'oo finds for Mack?' he asked drily.

'A gen'leman,' said Jemmy, ''oo wishes to remain anonymous.'

'Ah!' said Pa, the Doubting Thomas, 'a lot o' gen'lemen wants to do that.' But Pa was an embittered man. Everyone knew that. And everyone felt how momentous a new start had been made—the dawn of a new day, perhaps—the end of a nation's long winter of humiliation.

Jemmy looked across at the 'Arf-Pint with a grim little smile. 'Well,' he said, 'are you puttin' that las' shirt on the 'Ope?'

'I'm thinkin'' said Dick.

'I thought you would, when the time came,' said Jemmy with that confounded little smile of triumph, as though he knew more, Dick indignantly thought, about everyone's innards than men knew themselves.

Dick turned on the tormentor. 'Wot are *you* doin', then? Puttin' your own ol' clobber on Mack an' down wi' th' Englishman—wot?'

Jemmy seemed, alas, to be quite undiscomfited by the patriotic jibe. 'If you're givin' money away,' he said, 'I don't so much mind if I do 'ave a little 'arf-'undred.'

''Arf-'undred! Swankin' perisher! An' pullin' me leg too!' These, no doubt, were Dick Redwell's thoughts. What he said, with the utmost earnestness, was 'Thought I wouldn' back me fancy, did yer? Well, I'll tell yer wot I'll do. I'll bet on Dubber, evens, twenty quid—so come.'

'Thet's a bet' said Jemmy, with alacrity. He put it down somewhat showily. 'Any other gen'leman a-doin' anythink on this event?' He looked round the bar as he spoke, notebook in hand.

So the humbler riverside betting on the great race opened with the astonishing news that there was plenty of money

going on Dubber at evens. Such news travels along a good tow-path with the mysterious speed of bazaar rumour in India. Against all evidence and reason the word went round, and it soon reached the Press, that the 'Ope would not by any means go as a lamb to the slaughter. A surprise, the Press said, was quite on the cards. 'Ho, ho! there's money in this,' was the natural reflection of a crowd of patriotic English sportsmen. They acted on the reflection till they had driven the odds up to the fantastic figure of 4 to 3 on Dubber. 'Ho, ho! these be good prices' was then the equally natural reflection of a still larger crowd of sporting realists. These, too, acted on their reflection till the odds changed to 5 to 1 on the Australian. Other fluctuations ensued, and all were thoroughly boomed by the sporting press. From being as dead as mutton, professional sculling was turned almost suddenly into the most live betting sport in the country—of course always barring the Turf.

III

The great Bacon, a tip-top philosopher, held that what makes the whole great world go round is some mysterious natural force that 'goeth of its own motion, beyond the rules of wisdom.' Such a force, in the little world of Dubbers and Macks, Pa Tenches and Little 'Arf-Pints, was Mr. Patrick Nugent, late Sergeant, Grenadier Guards.

In the tranquil depths of the long Victorian peace Paddy Nugent had vowed himself to the profession of arms. It was at that time one of the safest of all walks in life, at any rate for the body. As though to make security doubly secure, the prudent Paddy had soon specialised as officers' mess Sergeant to his battalion. In that great office he had built up a nice little book-making business. Most of his clients were junior

officers of the Brigade of Guards, a highly solvent body of men, and Paddy never made a bad debt. He swiftly grew richer.

Not swiftly enough, however, to satisfy Paddy's desires. He felt himself galled, as many a worthy bookie has felt, by the iron law that some horse or other *must* win. Why should not all the beasts lose, or all except one appointed to win by some wise bookie—by Paddy, in fact. Then the last sedimentary traces of evil would have been strained out of life. Paddy nursed, throughout his military service, an unconquerable hope of shifting the whole basis of that eternal uncertainty which fascinates backers. In his ideal world the creatures would no longer be risking their money on so frail and unstable a thing as actual horseflesh. They would, although they knew it not, be betting about what might happen to be Paddy's choice of a suitable winner.

Retired from the tented field, and settled in that famous sporting house the old 'Gold Fish' at Richmond, not far from the river, Paddy perceived for the first time the moribund state of English professional sculling. Was not its dirge being sung every night in his own commodious bar? But a sport's extremity may be a sage's opportunity. It did not take long to flash upon Paddy that here was a scheme of things all shattered to bits already and only waiting for some sportsman of spirit to re-mould it nearer to his heart's desire. Wisdom would purge the game of its dangerous element of uncertainty —not for the public, of course, but for the wise reconstructor.

To execute this auriferous plan, Paddy first went for a quiet talk with Larry Mack, then one of the great scullers of the world. Paddy found him also one of the most docile, innocent and deep-thirsted of giants. Had Larry any fancy to three months' lodging and food of the best, a new sculling-

boat, twenty pound down and fifty more later—all for just taking a leisurely row over the championship course a length or two astern of a similar boat occupied by Orris Dubber?

Larry faintly demurred. 'I'd liefer row in front av Orris,' he said, 'it's riskin' me character.'

'And amn't I riskin' all?' Paddy argued. 'And me with a first-class hotel!'

The fiend and conscience seemed to be having it out in the immensely broad and deep bosom of Larry. 'A poor thing is ut,' he said, 'to do the public. The like of sellin' a ruptured pup in the dark of the night to a man with drink taken.'

'Is ut a poor thing to live on the fat of the land, at the "Star an' Garther" Hotel, for the fourth part of a year, an' no sweatin' your guts out with serious trainin' at all, only scullin' for pleasure, an' always a dhrink at any time, now or hereafther, ye'd step across to the "Gold Fish"?'

That fetched him, as the old ballad says. The fiend got away with it. 'I'm on,' said Larry, and Paddy went off on the easier half of his mission—to offer to the Only 'Ope the dazzling prospect of dwelling, for three months, among the flesh-pots of the 'Gold Fish' itself, training very gently, and then preceding Larry in a becomingly strenuous-looking procession by water from Putney to Mortlake.

Dubber slowly took the offer in. 'The manager at Foker's brewery,' he said, ''as often said 'e couldn' put me in a beer-'ouse, not without I won a fus'-class rice. Said I wouldn' drawr no custom. Thet's a proper promise, yn't it?'

'Tubbe sure,' said Paddy. 'Anny court in the wide worl' would enforce it.'

'I'm on,' said Dubber, too. And so the two foundation stones of a notable reform were well and truly laid.

IV

At any time the life of a sculler in training has points. The victuals are good. They come in of themselves, like the kindliest of the kindly fruits of the earth. For your work you take agreeable exercise. As an obligation of honour you keep your mind cheerful at odd times with billiards and golf. Duty—'stern daughter of the voice of God'— makes you the cynosure of countless adoring eyes and honorific cameras. You can render a reporter happy with a few unstudied words and intoxicate schoolboys with the gift of your signature unaccompanied by the other constituents of a cheque. You are the nearest thing there is now to a king, of the best period, one who could make invalids well with the touch of his hand. And, to crown the felicity of Dubber, the palm would fall to his lot as the Derby fell to Eclipse's, without the drawback of a violent and precarious struggle. As for Larry—defeat, where was thy sting? Nugent would not let him down; Nugent was jingling with money; Nugent would pay up like a man for any loss of prestige.

So the two heroes went peacefully sculling along into a smiling future, two daily outings apiece, while Paddy Nugent gave his whole mind to the duty of placing, as he said, the stable money. Paddy's staff-work was brilliant. A lesser mind might have made a blind rush to put all the money on Dubber he could, as soon as he could. And such a mind would have found no market worth mention. Paddy's first stroke was to set the riverside talking and betting: that would soon get the notion flying about that the race was a live exciting event. Hence the missionary visits of Jemmy Burton and other staff-captains of Paddy's to the 'Jolly Waterman' and

many another snug riverain temple of sport. These envoys would back either Dubber or Mack—whichever course seemed likelier in each case to set betting well afoot. It cost a little money; still the fish to be caught was a bit of a whale; why grudge a ha'porth of ground-bait?

You see, Paddy thought on big lines, as they say. It answered, too. No hard-headed realist of the tow-path believed that Dubber could do more than keep Mack in sight over a course of four miles and a quarter. When it was rumoured that someone had drugged a crowd of romantic patriots into dreaming that Dubber could win, the hard-headed realists rushed up with their money from all sides, the odds on Larry lengthened, and Paddy's many agents were able to take the hard-headed realists on at excellent prices.

Then Paddy himself took the field. Thanks to guard duty at Windsor, rowing and sculling have ever stirred the heart of the Brigade of Guards. So he made bold to tell some of his earliest clients, with manly frankness, that he really believed he had found a flyer in 'my young prottejy, Dubber.' Being still young, and rich in the proud knowingness of youth, the earliest clients said the old robber was getting bats in the belfry. 'He's like all new owners,' one of them said. 'They can never believe they've not got a good horse.' Still, just to humour him, they would win back a bit of what he had made out of them in old days. So some of them put big money on Larry, half-hoping that they might lose and the Englishman win.

Thus the placing of the stable money went on swimmingly. A month before the race Paddy stood to win so much on Dubber that he insured Dubber's life for £8000, for a month. Then, with impressive self-restraint, he put down the goblet undrained, quitted the market for good and left the general

public to make its fortune on the race at its own discretion. This the general public showed the sincerest desire to do. The thing was now booming. The confidence of 'Dubber's *entourage*,' as Paddy was called in the evening papers, 'could not be overlooked by shrewd speculators.' The sporting press was daily pronouncing it an open question whether the long night of English sculling was not worn through at last and the first ruddy streaks of the dawn well in sight. And waves of generous fervour were running mountain high every night, and higher each night than the last, in every licensed house that looks on the Thames.

V

A week before the day fixed for the race a reporter with an agreeable manner called on Dubber at the 'Gold Fish.' Paddy was not in at the time, so Dubber saw the caller with no chaperon present. Would Dubber, the caller asked, give the English nation a message, 'same as Nelson and Wellington did' at other national crises?

Dubber cleared his throat, but no words came up it. So the pressman began to say beautiful and overwhelming things, with a kind of query at the end of each, as if to ask if that was not what Dubber had in his mind. All that Dubber did was to chuckle now and again, and to say 'Thet's right' a great many times. Then the journalist went away. That was all.

Next morning a wondrous 'interview' with Dubber appeared in a popular paper. Everything to which Dubber had answered 'Thet's right' was reported as having been spoken by Dubber, and many other things too. Aghast at his own vicarious eloquence, Dubber found that he had, by proxy, run riot in cavalier chat about 'the Cornstalk,' 'the Anti-

podean,' 'the bird from down under,' 'the Kangaroo' and other jaunty synonyms for Larry. Towards the end of the article its author had essayed a loftier strain. That spirited poem, 'Ye Mariners of England,' had been his inspiration. Disguised as Dubber, he had grown lyrical. The glorious standard of our English sculling would be launched again, next Saturday, to meet another foe. The meteor flag of British aquatic prowess would still terrific burn. Dubber would sweep through the deep from Putney Bridge to the 'Ship' inn at Mortlake, probably in record time. Then feast and song for his backers (*verb. sap.*) and a salutary rebuke to the uppishness of certain colonial sportsmen—'save the mark,' as it was alleged that Dubber had cuttingly subjoined.

Dubber read the stuff, and he scarcely knew where to look. All his friends would be grinning. And Larry—the simple but choleric Larry— !

There was a place on Wimbledon Common where these two would sometimes meet and say 'Good morning,' on their long training walks. Dubber made for it that day. He must try to explain that he was not the sweep he must seem to be.

Larry was there, right enough, with a newspaper crushed to a ball in his vast hand. He showed this masterpiece of compression to Dubber. 'Is this anny way,' he began, 'to be buckin' and gabbin'?'

Dubber pleaded almost piteously. He really liked the mild Irish giant and hated to hurt him. ''Twasn' me, Larry. No, not 'arf of it. The perisher done it 'imself—the bloke from the paper—most all of it.'

'Ach!—fine talkin'—now! An' what kind o' chat were ye havin' out of ye, anyway—settin' him off on his Kangaroos an' his Cornstalks, crabbin' us all?'

'Don't I tell you 't wasn' me? The bleeder jus' says,

" J'ever drink a glass o' dry champagne? " 'e says, " be way o' trainin'! " An' then presen'ly 'e says, " Another? " An' then presen'ly agen, " Well, 'ave one more," 'e says. Jus' a lot o' little bits o' sense, like that. An' then 'e puts in all thet guff about the meter an' the sweeps. Now j'ou suppose as I know anythink about verb sap an' them terrific burns? Thenk Gawd, no. 'Ave a bit o' reason, Larry, cawn't yer? '

But the gentlest of Samsons was past holding now. The *mouton* was *enragé* with a vengeance. ' Reason is ut? ' he roared. ' An' me afther houldin' me tongue day be day wi' the whowle o' me stren'th—turnin' thousan's of dhrinks from the door—an' th' entire Press down on its knees, prayin' an' off'rin' money and malt for anny ould gas from me lips! What's desthroyin' ye, Orris, is this—ye've not been anny sort of a champion before, wid the Press at your heels, an' ye're that much sot up be a civil quisthion or two, an' a little scope in the dhrinks, that ye must be comin' the world's champion over us all before ye set fut in your boat, an' it a great quisthion whether I'll iver be able to keep ye in front of meself for four miles an' a quarther widout pushin' your boat wid me own.'

Dubber had certainly brought to this meeting a humble and a contrite heart. But some taunts are past bearing. He said, with dignity, ' Thet'll do, Larry. P'raps you won't 'ev to go quite so slow as you think.'

Larry scowled. ' If I give my whowle mind,' he said, ' to what I'm about, I may kape in the rear. But,' he added darkly, ' be cripes, I'll sweat the dhry champagne out o' ye, Saturday.'

But Dubber's spirit was still on the rise. ' Gawd! ' he muttered fervently, ' I wish it was a real rice.'

' Do ye, thin? ' Larry replied, with some venom.

VI

As a good practical Catholic, Larry Mack had a way of going to confession two or three days before a big race. For this custom there was, for a man of Larry's profession, the sound general reason that your strength is as the strength of ten if your heart is pure and your conscience void of offence. This time there were also particular reasons. Here he was, up to the neck in as arrant a ramp as had ever been played off on the public. If he went to confession, this would have to come out; else would Larry be embezzling the grace of God for himself, as well as his backers' money for Nugent. And Father Bohun, though an Englishman, was a man in a thousand—a man in the world, but not of it; in it enough to love a good race and to hate a foul game, and not of it enough to take any such little games lightly. To a dead certainty Larry would get no absolution except on a positive promise to go straight before God and man and to do all that was in him to tick Dubber off.

That, Larry felt, would do very well. It would satisfy his spiritual needs. As Larry entered the church where Father Bohun heard confessions a light that never was on sea or land was shining in his face. As he left it, the peace that passes all understanding was his, combined with a certain touch of glee not quite so celestial.

VII

Like a Pope or a King, a great sculler can hardly talk to a friend, on the eve of a race, without seeing the fact reported in the evening press, with a bright guess at what they were saying. So it had to be at a very shy inn on a common, far

south of Mitcham, that Paddy met Larry to give him his final orders for the race next day. And then he never gave them after all. Before Paddy could open his mouth, Larry made the great plunge. 'It's no sort of thing for a civ'lised man to be doin'—gettin' on in the way that we are. I'm frikened.'

Paddy's alarm was dreadful to see. 'God help the man! Frikened!' he gasped. 'An' it despritly safe! Not a thing to be done but jus' paddle the course at a mod'rut speed, an' all over an' done with.'

'Aye, mebbe, till we're dead. An' what thin? A poor look out for the two of us.'

'Ach, man, ye're ravin', fit to be held,' cried Paddy, aghast. 'Are ye concaitin' that God has been puttin' money upon ye?'

'I'm pullin' up,' said Larry doggedly, 'befure I'm in the fire.'

'Is ut pull up?' Paddy almost shrieked in his terror. 'An' we with the whowle stable money invisted on Dubber, an' nothin' between us an' death. An' it th' elivinth hour itsilf an' you offrin' to scratch!'

Larry flamed up at that. 'Scratch! To Hell wid it, no! I've sot me han' to the plough an', begob, I'm not lookin' back till ye've seen the race of your life.'

Paddy had grown pale by now, but he pulled himself together. He took high moral ground. 'Ye'd bate the poor definceless bein'!'

'I would that,' said Larry, with deep relish.

Paddy shifted his ground. 'Ye'd roo'n me be treach'ry? Man, have ye no religion at all, to be sellin' a frien' that has kep' you three months in the heighth of condish'n?'

'I don't quisthion the grub,' Larry owned ruefully, moved by Paddy's distress.

Paddy saw him weakening. So he mourned on pathetically. 'An' you to set all me poor savins runnin' off down a steep place to the sea, the way of the pigs in the Bible. Come now, Larry, repint while there's time an' do what I desire you.'

Larry felt himself yielding. He struggled. He screwed himself up to stand fast. But he had to bluster, to do it. 'I will not,' he said. 'It's a gran' light I've seen, a day or two back, an' a voice out of Hivvin itself sayin' "Clean up the whowle of this river that's stinkin' up to the sky wid spoof races an' ramps an' roped scullers the way it has us houldin' our noses above."'

Then Paddy saw that the man had turned fanatic, mad to do miracles. All was lost. And Larry saw that Paddy saw the game was up. It hurt Larry's soft heart.

'It was a pity of him,' Larry said to Dubber, whom he contrived to see later that evening, just to give fair notice.

'E'll be all right,' Dubber said stonily. 'E'll lay orf 'is bets.'

'He'd be for killin' the two of us, cliver an' clane, if he could,' Larry said, 'jus' to have ut no race, afther all his conthrivin'.' Larry paused for a moment. 'Ye wudn't care,' he went on mildly, 'to go sick in the mornin', an' me waive me right to the race, jus' to lave the poor divil his money?'

Dubber looked quickly at Mack. Was Mack losing confidence. Was a genuine win in a first-class race swimming into his own ken at last, and trailing that cloud of glory behind it—the managership of a beer-house? 'Sick!' he said manfully. 'Naw! I'm not a-goin' sick. I'm gowin' strong. We'll soon see 'oo'll be druv from Putney up to Mortlake.'

VIII

Old amateurs of the sport will remember still, with a jump of the heart, the race of the next day. It was rowed on the top of a real Thames tide that hustled its way up the river like some holiday crowd jostling into a racecourse, all turbid and frothy and blithe. On that jolly flood the three big paddle steamers that followed the race, crowded with thorough sportsmen, looked like things cocked up into the air. All London, it seemed, had turned out.

All London had its reward. Old hands said that no such race had ever been seen on the Thames. It is true that Mack led all the way, but Dubber hung on to him like a bull-dog till half a mile from the finish. There both men stopped dead, almost in the same second, completely rowed out and unable to move, with the agonised backers of each man shrieking 'Gow on, Dubber. You got 'im,' or 'Gow on, Larry. 'E's beat.' Both men were far past hearing, but Larry was first, by a second or two, to revive and paddle feebly past the post.

Then there was a perfect carnival of sportsmanship. Larry, obeying his simple affections and sorry for a beaten man, edged his boat in close alongside Dubber's, till he could put a gigantic arm round Dubber's neck and murmur 'Good lad!' Dubber was moved too. 'I'm thinkin',' he said sadly, to the enfolding Larry, 'where's me little beer-'ouse?' The three huge floaty steamers listed heavily while their hordes of passengers craned over the near gunwale and revelled in the spectacle of this generous embrace. 'A clinkin' good race leaves no malice be'ind,' the sententious ones said.

On one of the steamers Paddy was busy displaying the

famous equanimity of thoroughbred sportsmen under bludgeon strokes of Fate. In this he was assisted by the devotion of friends in the bookmaking business, who had spent the last twenty-four hours in backing Larry for him in their own names. No doubt Paddy did not, on balance, have a good race. But his kind are not easily skinned. They can sell anything—even the fact that a little fraud of their own is not coming off.

On another steamer the Little 'Arf-Pint and Pa Tench cooled rapidly after the first glow of ecstasy kindled by Larry's caress. Corrosive memories invaded the Little 'Arf-Pint. 'Sweepin' the deep, eh!' he grunted sourly to Pa. 'More like Larry sweepin' up the floor wi' Dubber. Swep' up my two tenners, any'ow.'

'Ah! thet's wot English scullin's come to,' Pa responded. With sombre delight he drank in any word of dispraise of the puny brood now shuffling in the shoes of the heroes of old days—Chambers and Kelley, Renforth and Sadler—and Tench, it might have been, too, but for bad luck.

Thus babble and fume the children of this world. But from Hammersmith Bridge a child of light had walked stoically away, after seeing the Only 'Ope of his country toiling almost hopelessly in the wake of the terrible Australian. Priest, patriot, sportsman, and now martyr to conscience, Father Bohun must have known pretty well that he had decided the race when he tipped the balance in the fighting soul of Larry. Of earthly crowns there were few that this good pastor desired more earnestly for his country than the sculling championship of the world. But in the hour of temptation he had firmly ordered Satan to get behind him; he had forbidden the meteor flag to burn on the strength of any other than a square deal.

And even then, when he had it, as the slangy say, straight from the horse's mouth, that a great ramp had been on, and that now it was off, and that Larry would win, he had not—well, he had not done what so many of the laity would have done, in any Christian land. Such a man may well be found —as Laertes said of Ophelia—at work in a good situation when some of us shall lie howling.

WODJABET

I

TILL you come under enemy fire you can't tell how you will take it. There are quite a lot of ways. The first time that one man is just missed by a shell he will fly into a rage, as if a neighbour at Putney had thrown an old tin over the back garden wall and all but broken the cucumber frame. Another fellow will perk up at once and be quite pleased with himself, as if the whole business were football and he had headed the shell out of goal. A third will simply and piously wish it were bed-time to-night and all well. A fourth —and this one is my friend McAvity—feels as if he had just won a bet

James was the name that he had got at the font, but Wodjabet was what our whole platoon called him, because it was what he said more often than anything else. In his earliest youth he may have said ' What do you bet? ' but he had since felt a call to say it so often, and always so eagerly and so fast, that it had run together a bit, as the young lawyer's ' My lord ' turns to ' Mlud ' with the growth of his practice. For James, in civil life, had been one of those men who can hardly come into a room without wanting to take you on about something or other—' Bet you there isn't fifty books in this room,' ' Wodjabet a fly lands on you sooner than me? '—all that sort of little fancy speculation.

As soon as we got to the front and he had been sniped and bombarded a little, it seemed to me that he looked better. I fancy the way of it was that every time a shell or a bomb or bullet came near him he felt as if he had said to the German who sent it ' Wodjabet you'll hit me? ' He had triumphantly

taken the enemy on. As time went on and things kept missing him he got to be bucked beyond words. He must have felt that he was a hell of a punter; with a star like his he'd break the bank at Potsdam yet. He went about with his eyes shining. He was the only man I ever knew that positively fretted to be out on guard in the trench. Resting in a good dug-out was mere lost time to him. It was as if frost had stopped all racing. Just like that. He pined.

If you feel that you can't make a bet but you'll win it, you'll never be able to get as many bets on as you want. And that was Wodjabet's trouble. Do what he might, Fritz couldn't send over as much stuff as Wodjabet needed to keep him quite sure that the winning sequence was still going strong. And so Wodjabet took it into his head to stimulate the supply, and that was all wrong.

I caught him at it myself. I was platoon-sergeant then, and very responsible. One night I was going my round of our platoon's sector of trench—one of the clear nights when you would see the rats on the edge of the parapet, up on their hind-legs, silhouetted black against a low moon, making love or war I suppose, capering anyhow. Wodjabet's post was just round a corner, so that I didn't see him till I was almost upon him. And he didn't notice me coming. He was too much taken up with this rotten game he was at. First he'd put up his arm at full length and wave it about. The moon was setting just behind that bit of our line, so that Fritz must have seen Wodjabet's hand like a thing thrown black on a white screen. Of course Fritz took a shot—he didn't often get such a target in any quiet part of the line. Then Wodjabet's hand snapped its fingers and Wodjabet chuckled, all to himself as he thought, and lowered the hand for a rest. No doubt he felt as if he had cleaned out a bookie.

'What the Hell are you after?' I asked, though I knew.

'I am not, Sergeant,' said he. 'It isn't the fact.'

'What isn't the fact?' I said, though I guessed very well what he meant.

'That I was attemptin',' said he, 'to sneak a cheap ticket to Blighty.'

'Are you mad, then,' said I, 'not to know that there's only one thing will be said to a man that comes in off a guard with a hole in the flat of his hand and says it was Germans that made it?'

'Begob,' said he, 'I never thought of that.' The man was downcast now, fit to kiss any rod that you'd take to him. If I'd fetched him a kick he'd have turned me the other posterior.

'Don't I know very well that you didn't?' said I. 'Nor of winning the war and getting a look at the Rhine, nor of anything else in the world but this blithering passion you have for backing yourself to win nothing at all.' I grew virtuous, I can tell you. I was the outraged father and all, as platoon-sergeants used to become in the War, unless they became proper robbers.

II

That was the autumn of 1915. About the New Year I lost sight of McAvity and the rest for a time. A wound sent me to bed for a month at Versailles and thence to the Division's depot at the base at Etaples, to convalesce on light duty before going back to my regular work.

At the depot they gave me a fine choice of jobs, two being vacant—Provost-Sergeant and Sergeant in charge at the Officers' Mess. A head-waiter's life is a dignified thing, but a Provost's is an open-air job, with power to come in when it rains. Besides, crime has a charm for us all. So I turned

policeman and said in my heart that people were going to see what a proper sleuth was.

I did, in fact, nab a French plasterer sneaking a sock that one of our cooks had hung out to dry on the roof of a tent. But that was pretty well my only real peep at the titanic strife between passion and eternal law. Most of the work of me and my powerful force of four men was heading thirsty brethren off the wet canteen till due hours, and whacking the walls of tents with my stick after Lights Out to make ardent reinforcements stop talking and get down to sleep.

Still I did have a guard-tent which was known as The Jug, like every respectable prison. And now and then I had some captive in it—nearly always a man awaiting trial for coming back a day late from his home leave, through meeting a friend at Waterloo Station. They used to tell me about it. You know the wise and merciful rule that a soldier under arrest must always be given an hour's outdoor exercise per day, under escort. I always took them out myself, and they told me in what good time they had left their homes and how they had reached Waterloo with an hour to spare, and how that friend had been on the platform and one thing had led to another till the train fairly gave them the slip—didn't even whistle.

I don't know why I liked those walks—possibly because it felt like being home again and giving a run to the dog. But the walk I liked best was the one I took, in the fulness of time, with McAvity. He had been home on leave, like the rest, and then—

From my Jug, at the edge of the depot's gravelled parade-ground, I walked this long-lost son of my own through the small pine-wood north of the camp and out on to the high naked sand-hills beyond. It was March now; the sun had got a little strength; the white sands below on the flat miles

of shore appeared dry; all the Channel looked brisk with little white crests to crisp little waves. England was somewhere north-west, but the distance was mist and the sea looked mighty extensive with all that little endless fretting of white. It was the sort of sight that makes you feel rather little and sad and left to yourself, the devil knows why: you may get the same feel from a great stretch of plough with a light fall of snow lying on it.

I made him sit down where we'd get all the sun and no wind. I gave him a gasper to smoke and left him to mellow a bit in the warmth before I said 'So the train bolted?'

'It did that,' he said mournfully. 'Like a colt. And I barely turning me back for an instant, to speak to a very old friend.'

'Oh! *He* was there all right?' I said. 'At Waterloo?'

'He was, Sergeant.' Wodjabet's face expressed deep surprise at my unaccountable knowledge.

'He always is,' I said. 'And so's the bar.'

'And that's a true word, too,' he said with conviction. 'They'd have a right not to be keeping a bar in the place. I hear there are losings of trains in it daily.'

He spoke just as simply and seriously as a child. And he acted like one, and a good one, most of the time. He told you the truth, he did what you bade him, he only went on the bend very seldom, he didn't shirk or grouse, he took things as they came, he was a good quiet trier. And yet he did it all as if he had some precious thing on his mind all the time and only went straight because he couldn't often be bothered to break rules or fall out with sergeants—it would get in the way of this darling old preoccupation of his. He looked like it too: most of his face was like anyone else's; not his eyes, though; they would often go shiny and big of themselves when you

were talking to him about any old thing, quite dull in itself. At these times they wouldn't be really looking at anything, either—anything outside him. I fancy they turned themselves in, when he got worked up, so that they'd see whatever it was that he had in his mind, and that was what made them shiny.

They looked dull enough now. 'Can you give me an estimate, Sergeant,' he asked, 'of how much I'll be getting?'

'Were you drunk when arrested?'

'I'm not wholly clear about that. But it will be right on the crime-sheet. The corporal that took me looked a very truthful man.'

'Did you hit him?' I asked.

'I'm not wholly sure. But he'll know.'

'Drunk and resisting,' said I, 'is twenty-eight days on the sands.' I pointed to the wire-hedged prison camp on the desolate beach. It looked dismally sanitary. 'Late back from leave is the same. About fifty-six days for the lot.'

He almost shrieked. 'Mother of God! I'll be losing eight weeks of the war!'

I stared at the man. You see, it was 1916. We were, most of us, far past the silly-fool stage of our soldiering. We didn't keep up the old gaff about liking the war. 'There'd be bags of it left,' I assured him, 'if you were in jug for a year.'

'Are ye positive, Sergeant,' he asked very gravely, 'the King and the Kaiser wouldn't be meeting in Holland or Spain, and taking a glass, and making a peace on us all before morning?'

'They would not,' said I, 'you ignorant fellow. Aren't they constitutional kings?'

'I'm exceedin'ly glad to hear that,' he replied. 'There'll be many sore hearts when the war will be over.'

I hooted at that. ' Do you mean there's a good many cooks at the base, and cashiers, and men that can't do with the sight of their wives? '

' Aye and men that never knew the grand thing that life is till they were shot over. Like boys that had lived to be men and never seen porter or beer—only water. Me own life, for one, hadn't had a head on it ever before I got out to this war.'

' You've got it badly,' I said. I remembered about his complaint—how he was one of the cranks that don't feel the air is crawling with venomous muck when it whistles all round them: they just feel the nip has got into the whisky. ' Well,' I said, ' there's hope for you, even in quod. Fritz has been bombing us here a bit lately.'

He brightened a little at that. But he was humble about his little indulgences. ' Just to see a bit o' life.' he pleaded. ' Just to have a bit o' froth on it.'

It was time to go back to The Jug. He got those fifty-six days.

III

Not for another four months did the doctors let me go back up the line. But I could pull strings at the depot by then. So I wangled my way back to my own old platoon to act as supernumerary Sergeant till some other Sergeant got done in. And one of the first men I saw when I got there was McAvity, still in one piece.

We went into the line the next evening, about east of Bully Grenay. The ground is all chalk in those parts, with a little wet clay like brown putty on top. I believe they put that whole lot of front underground later on, and every sentry kept guard in a sort of worm-cast, stuck up at the top of a shaft.

But the time we were there we had only an old German trench with dug-outs that faced the wrong way, so that enemy shells would come in by the front door without having to knock. And that inconvenience wasn't the worst, either. Between the platoon's two last sentry-posts on the left there was a fifty-yard bit of trench that was possessed with a devil. It looked a perfectly quiet, innocent place: Fritz's front line was a long three hundred yards off, a little way down the far side of a low ridge of ground. This ridge was our working horizon: from our trench ground sloped away up to it gently: beyond it we saw only sky and a big, red moon rising.

A Jock sergeant from whom we took over gave us a wink and said that it was as good as a bargain with Fritz that nobody was to sneak up to the ridge on his belly and loose a shot over it. There were several places like that in the line—places absolutely made for swopping casualties: start swopping once and you would never be done. You don't want wear and tear for nothing unless you're McAvity or a fool Commander-in-Chief. So that bit of trench, like one or two others, had been pretty well out of the war for two years. It looked it too. No one had bothered to make a good job of it. For a good forty yards it was not three feet deep. And that part lay low, so it made a very good drain for the slope down from the ridge. On the day we went in it had rained pretty hard, and for quite thirty yards the trench was brimful of water. If you kept to the trench in going along to our last left-flank post, you had to wade up to your hips and the rest of you stuck up clear into the air.

I thought that post would make a pretty little bit of oddity for Wodjabet So I took him along to relieve the outgoing Jock. The Jock platoon sergeant was with us and when we came to the water-logged part of the trench he said, 'It'll no'

kill a man to be wet to the guts, but it does him nae gude,' and he got out of the trench and walked along the parapet, bolt upright. Well, I thought, *he* ought to know, so I did as he did and let McAvity do it. And when we had changed the sentries the two Jocks and I did the same thing coming back. Peace, perfect peace, I thought to myself.

It wasn't long after Midsummer then, and McAvity's two-hour turn upon guard had started at two in the morning. So the air had only just begun getting grey when I came along with the man due to relieve him. We went the dry way, as before, and it was all right. It took me a bit of a time to show the new man the lie of the land, and the shelf for his bombs and this thing and that. The sky was whitening fast all the while, and a pretty thin twilight was all that was left when I and McAvity set out for home.

'Is it swim the canal?' he asked, 'or keep to the tow-path?'

I knew it was the sin against the Holy Ghost to be walking about on the top of the earth for one's bodily comfort with three feet of cover at hand. But, golly! that water was dirty. 'We'll chance it,' I said, 'overland.' So I walked on the bank, and McAvity after me. But I felt very naked out there, cocked up on the swell of the globe, with the dawn staring at us. That's the trench instinct. A fox has it too. You can tell by the crouch of his belly.

I was half-way across the deep part when all the queerness turned natural suddenly. In that strange, empty place I heard a quite common, familiar sound—a quick swish past my head and then a little flicking or dipping noise on my right, and I saw a tiny trickle of loosened earth slipping down from the face of a mound of loose chalk at the back of our trench.

'Into it, Jemmy,' I yelled. 'Into the sewer and tuck in

your tuppenny.' You see, I had to repeat. Wodjabet had become like a man without either sense or obedience. He simply stood up all the straighter, as if that bullet had put new life into him. He didn't mind me at all. He just looked East as if something over that way interested him hugely.

'God blast you, don't keep me waiting,' I said. But of course I wasn't leaving it to him to get us both shot. I hustled him into the trench and took to it myself and ran him along with his nose well down to the bilge and my knee in his back when required, till that trench was seven feet deep. Then I damned him at leisure, all the way back to our rotten dug-out. He took it all meekly, and yet I could swear he didn't take it to heart! he wasn't minding anything I said; he was scarcely hearing it—only trying to do the polite thing—and the shine was going down in his eyes. Once or twice he began 'How the blazes——?' and then stopped and went on with his private wondering.

You may be wondering, too, how the blazes a bare slope of earth could project rifle bullets. It's perfectly easy. We learnt to snipe too, later on in the war. We found how to fire out through a hillside or a broken gun-wheel, or the ear of a stinking dead horse. But we were a fine vivid green in those early days and it puzzled us all. So I thought I would report to Mr. Parke, commanding the platoon, the way that slope was spitting. So 'Down you go,' I said to McAvity when we reached the front door of the little home. 'I'm walking on.'

He said bashfully, 'Sergeant, I have a very great fear that I left me gold watch on the shelf at the post I was in. I'll not be a minute.' He was for making off back, the way we had come.

'You will not,' said I, 'nor a second. You'll go down at once to your rest.' I knew he had no watch at all, gold or tin.

He turned in, quite good, only sorrowful, like a sweet-

tempered child when it is held up in a raid on the jam. Then I went on down the trench to tell Parke.

Parke was delighted. 'We'll go out,' he said, 'to-night and feel that slope all over with our hands. I'll come and take a first look at it now.' So we went off at once.

It could have been hardly ten minutes since Wodjabet was relieved when Parke and I came into sight of that beast of a place. We saw the maddest sight. Where the water was deepest it had the washy, splashy look that a swimming-bath has, or the pool at the Zoo where the seals go switchbacking in and out of the water. We couldn't see why, for there seemed to be nobody there till the surface broke, all of a sudden, and a man shot up full-length out of the water into the air, like a dace when it jumps to get away from a pike. Next moment there came the report of a rifle, but by that time the leaping figure had dropped to the water again and was wholly submerged except about an inch of upturned face, which I took to be the infatuated creature's breathing arrangements.

Parke turned to me, gaping. 'Who's that damned Jack-in-the-box?' Even as he said it, Wodjabet leapt a foot higher than the last time, the rifle went off, and Wodjabet was safely re-immersed.

'Private McAvity, Sir,' I reported. 'A proper madman, Sir. Just come off guard and goes out to bait the Fritz sniper.'

'Come here, you fellow there,' roared Parke.

The sound of many waters may have deafened McAvity. Or perhaps he had no ears at all, at the time, for anyone but his own particular Siren. Certainly all that he did, when his officer called, was to leap a third time, the leap of a salmon at a weir. Once more the rifle went, and once more Wodjabet submerged triumphantly, all but the tip of his periscope.

Parke was raging at the indiscipline of it. He was a big

strong boy and a good officer to his men, but peppery. He rushed into the water and took a good hold of McAvity's tunic-collar and lugged him ignominiously out into safety. Then he got down to work cursing McAvity up hill and down dale.

'I only meant a little bit o' fun, Sir,' Wodjabet gasped humbly.

'Fun! Tossing up with the Germans for Allied man-power!'

Presently Wodjabet was allowed to slink off, with his ears full of fleas, to dry in the sun. 'A good man, Sergeant?' Parke inquired, looking after him. Parke's good humour was returning. The weather was hot and he didn't much mind getting wet.

'First-rate, Sir,' I replied. 'And his rifle a picture. A little bit mad, Sir, of course.'

'All the best of us are. Well, keep him alive as long as you can. We'll put a breast-work to-night at that place. You'd better swim under water till then.'

IV

Wodjabet looked troubled all that day, rather like a spaniel that's chock full of good feelings but knows it has been naughty. There was something else wrong with him too. I guessed it was this: he was feeling like a born punter who has been dumped down at Monte Carlo and knows the tables are near—can almost smell them, and yet isn't let in at the doors.

Anyone but himself would have slept in the sun all the part of that day that he wasn't on guard. Wodjabet lay about, but he never really closed an eye: he only blinked the way a cat does, letting on that it's sleepy when really its eyes are

aglow with some grand private excitement or other. He hadn't slept one wink the night before, what with the relief and the bit of guard duty, and then the two duckings. So you may guess he was tired and sleepy and all by the time it was dark the next night and he doing a guard at the quietest, healthiest post on the whole platoon sector. I chose it for that, to keep him from trying to pull Fritz's leg any more. But I hadn't left him there half an hour before I thought 'What if it's only too quiet?' and jumped up and went round to visit him.

Blowed if he hadn't done just what I was fearing. He wasn't lying down. He would never have done that. He was standing up jammed back and front, his knees against the front wall of the trench, his back against the rear wall, his rifle between his legs, and his head fallen forward. The sleepiness had caught him where he stood, as some sorts of gas do, and he had gone off with scarcely any change of position.

Of course the crime was capital. But there are too many capital crimes in a war—so we sergeants thought, and we took leave, in my battalion at least, to run a little martial law of our own making. It was a law utterly lawless. Whenever we found a sentry asleep we just fell upon him and throttled and pummelled and kicked him awake. He always thought Fritz had come over and got him. The sergeant who did it might have been tried once for assaulting a private, and then a second time for screening a crime. But, of many men that we treated this way, I never knew one who told tales or pleaded that he'd had a right to be shot, nor yet one who ever took a chance again of waking with two German hands squelching his gullet.

I liked McAvity well, but duty is duty, even when it's a little irregular. So I set about him. And this I will say—

that I couldn't wish any sentry of mine who woke up with a German's thumbs on his windpipe to give a better reaction. He woke as fast as a dog and started to fight like a good one. It might have taken me all I knew to garotte him. But I had hardly begun before I heard somebody saying, 'That will do, Sergeant. The legal punishment will suffice,' and there was the adjutant, Captain L. Graves, standing back in a shadow, seven yards off. He must have been there, standing like that and not moving, before I arrived.

None of us liked the adjutant. He was a hard man and given to slinking about where you wouldn't expect him—an officer of the sort that thinks every man must be rotten if only you knew. 'When did this man go on guard?' he asked me.

'One o'clock, Sir,' I said.

The adjutant looked at his watch. 'Half an hour ago,' he said. 'Fast asleep in ten minutes. Get the next relief now, and put this shirker under arrest.'

I could see Wodjabet flinch at the name he was called. I made bold to say 'He's a most fearless man, Sir. A good soldier till now.'

'Keep that for the court-martial, Sergeant,' said the adjutant.

I had to go. I knew the holy passion the adjutant had for getting soldier-men punished.

V

They did not shoot McAvity—did not even quite condemn him to death. Of course I swore pretty hard about the fatigues I had been giving him for days before. Mr. Parke made good play with some aspirin that he said he had given the prisoner because of a ducking: Parke got the doctor to say it was rare

stuff for sending people asleep. What with this, that and the other they made it out that five years' penal servitude was the right fit for Wodjabet's misdoing, and that he had better start serving it after the war.

That was a new law, I heard. You might get twenty years, but you would just go on with your duty till the war ended and then go to quod. And everyone said that if you went straight till the end of the war, and we won, Haig was sure to say 'Just let him off, for me, this time.' A good law too and I shouldn't much mind if the same sort of ticket-of-leave were given in peace-time.

Wodjabet came back to the platoon looking a bit bewildered and dull. We were out of the line at the time, for a Divisional rest, but he brightened up when we went south for the big September attack on the Somme. All that autumn and all the next summer and autumn in the big fights east of Arras and Ypres he did well and looked fairly contented and never got hit, as does happen sometimes, though not very often, to people who go about asking for more trouble than comes of itself.

I never do that. And yet I stopped a lot of little bits of shrapnel, all from one burst, at Passchendaele on November 6. That meant an operation a month, for six months, to dig the bits out of my innards. So I didn't get back to the centre of things till the August before the war ended. Still by Heaven's own luck, and a little contrivance, I was sent once again to the good old platoon a few days before the big push east of Amiens, when the Germans turned to go home.

There was scarcely anyone left of the first jolly crowd that had come out together to France about three years before, with all their troubles to come. But there was Wodjabet still, and a mighty reputation he had by that time. He was the

oldest soldier in the Company; he'd won the Military Medal at Cambrai, and the strange lads that filled the platoon used to sit round him and wait till he'd speak. The man Graves was dead, to the satisfaction of all; Parke commanded the Company; even the Colonel, I heard, had got an eye cocked on McAvity as a stout man who had slipped up by a fluke and was now making good in spite of it all, like a story-book hero.

He was a treasure to me, with the queer innocent boys I had to look after. The one thing I didn't quite like in his ways was a sort of disquietedness. The better things went with the war, the more uneasy he seemed. 'You're not fretting,' I asked him at last, 'over that little trouble?' It was towards the end of October I spoke.

'I'm thinking,' he said, very careworn, 'the war will be apt to break down on us, any time now.'

'God hurry it!' said I. 'Have you any objection?'

'They're talking,' he said, 'of some Fourteen Points the Americans have, that would stifle it, lock, stock and barrel.'

'And what's wrong,' I asked him, 'with winning on points?'

'It's the state we'll all be in, after, that has me distracted,' said Wodjabet, scratching his hair like a person in misery.

'Have you no sort of job to go back to?' said I.

'There's more jobs in my trade,' he said, 'than there's men that can do them.'

'Are you frightened,' I asked, 'of this "land fit for heroes" the crooks have been hawking?'

'Ah, then, would I be minding the blather and lies of them?'

He was on guard at the time, and I going my rounds. Trenches didn't come to much in those last weeks of the war.

Fritz was going back too fast to dig them good and we were too tired, too, to dig them much deeper. There was a good deal of standing about among houses and trees and any sort of odd cover, and some fancy shooting. At that very moment a whimper like a gnat's came singing past, between us, and overhead the gunners were sending the big whistling sighs of their shells winging augustly along over great arches. Wodjabet drank in the noises, now grown almost homely. 'It's that we'll be missing,' he said ruefully.

'Missing!' I said. 'I'll miss nothing the night that it stops but the sleep that I've lost for three years in preventing mad devils like you from getting their heads free in trenches.'

'Do ye think ye will, Sergeant?' he asked very earnestly. 'Will ye be able to sleep? I'm sore fearing the guts will be gone out of life. We'll be safe, and that's fine, but what if the taste be gone out of the safety itself, and the good of it lost on us? Whethen isn't a man safe when he's dead, only he hasn't the feel of it, and the feel is the thing? And the feel isn't there to be had except there's a weeny bit of a risk, for your safeness to show up agen it. Sergeant, I'm getting terribly frightened.'

He looked it. The man was almost entreating me to say something from which he could sincerely draw comfort. 'D'ye think,' he went nervously on, 'ye will find it enjurable? —lying in bed all the night, and the air gone as flat as the washin's of beer they'd swab off the zinc of a bar, and never one waft of a shell nor the whine of one bullet to make the grand feel of your safety bite on your mind? Won't ye be feeling as if there was nothing ye'd offer to eat but would turn into sawdust?'

'I will not, Jemmy,' said I. 'With the great diseases there are in the world, and a job to be lost, and railway

disasters and fire and one sort of plague and another, I am expecting to do exceedingly well without any praying for war in our time.'

'Ye really think so, Sergeant? Ye're not kiddin' me?' You could see he was honestly hungering to be able to feel I was right and not just an irrational optimist nor a dealer in blarney. 'Well,' he sighed, 'praise God, there's a little war left. Ach, if only a man had the trick to store up enough of the feel of it in his soul, while it lasts! Just to consume by degrees, all the rest of his life. Begob! he could stand anything.'

He was in torment.

VI

During the war's last three weeks he grew more haggard daily. By November the tenth the rumour had grown pretty strong that at any time now we might get the word to knock off. We were all wondering what we should do when the whistle went—give three cheers for Fritz and get our back pay and go home in the evening, or go on mounting guards and playing soldiers, or what. On the last night of all, as it turned out to be, I could see Wodjabet trying to hide his distress when I visited him at his post. It was nearly midnight then, and we were in the suburbs of a little mining town.

'Sergeant, is it the truth that I'm hearing?' he said, when he had reported all quiet.

'There's no cease-fire order in yet,' I replied.

'Can you tell me, Sergeant,' he said, 'the name of the place that I have to me front—the town with the lights blinking in it?'

'That's Mons,' I told him, 'where the war began.'

'It'll end there too, I'm thinking,' he said very sorrow-

fully. 'I'm told when a stag's getting old and near dying he'll make for the place he was foaled in. It's now or never. We're all but through with it.'

I didn't see then what he meant. The next post that I had to visit was in an old ruinous shed that we had loop-holed, two hundred yards further on. I did my business there and started back. Then I saw Wodjabet standing full-length on top of a low wall that was close to his post. There was a bright moon and in it he looked like a black statue hoisted above the whole country-side. He was staring out east at a low railway embankment—we all took it that Fritz was just on its far side.

I quickened up a bit, meaning of course to make him stop playing the fool and get down. But the ground was all broken and messed up with old rusty wire: I couldn't go fast: and before I was twenty yards nearer to Wodjabet he had started loosing off shot after shot at that embankment. I yelled to him to hold his fire and get down, but he was past hearing, I guess—past thinking of anything in the world except having a flutter with Fritz before closing-time.

I kept on running, and damning his eyes, but long before I could get at him he had emptied the magazine of his rifle and then he had got out a flash-lamp and thrown the light up on his tin hat and his face and down on his uniform and his rifle. He must have been fairly raging to get Fritz to see that the best mark in the war was going a-begging. Mark!—he was like the Nelson statue in Trafalgar Square, with a searchlight upon it.

Fritz did nothing at all. It was as if he weren't there. I suppose he wasn't killing that night unless you quite forced him. Four years and a bit had sufficed for his needs. But Wodjabet wouldn't take No for an answer. Perhaps he saw me rushing back at last and heard me hallooing and knew the

game would be up if once I got at him. Or perhaps he never noticed me and was taken up wholly with that mad desire of his to take the Germans on once more, for a real good flutter, before the casino could put up its shutters. Down he got, with a jump, from this lighthouse he'd made of himself and off into the East, waving his lamp, to rout out the Germans—make them turn to, willy-nilly, and give him the thrill he required.

'Right off it!' I thought, as I stumbled along. But he was one of my men, to be kept out of scrapes by any means within reason. So I gave chase. I gained on him a bit, for he checked once and again to re-load and let the embankment have another clip of cartridges.

Half-way to the railway I got him to notice me for the first time. 'Come back with me, Jemmy,' I said, 'and I'll not have you tried for deserting.'

'Desertin'!' he cried. 'It's the war is desertin' meself. I'm hunting for it high and low, and it hiding, and me in the fearfullest need that ever I had.'

He was keeping out of my reach, but I begged him again. 'Come back with me, Jemmy. Remember the back pay to get, and the medals and all, and a great rest from the war, and the trouble that's on you.'

'Is it rest from the war?' he squealed very bitterly. 'From the war! And it all the rest that I'll get in me life! Good-bye to ye, Sergeant, God help ye.' And off he went plunging ahead, to murder any German alive for refusing to snipe him. Right up the embankment he went and stood at the top for a minute, flouting the moon, and loosed off another five shots.

I suppose Fritz got tired at last, or he had to defend himself. There was just the one shot of a rifle that didn't sound

British, and Jemmy flopped forward and didn't shoot any more. So I wrote him off a loss and went back to the rest of my business. The war ended next day before dinner and we had him buried by tea-time.

VII

I have heard a man say we are all a bit mad, and the proper certified loonies only a little bit further off it than most of us are. I thought of it later that night. For beyond a doubt it was queer to stretch down to sleep with not one gun at work anywhere, nor the chance of a shot all the night. For three years or more the old rumble and grumble had been the most regular thing in one's world. They say when you come off a long steamer voyage you can't sleep your first night on shore, because it's too quiet—no beat of the engine. I couldn't sleep either. I lay awake thinking how easily somebody else might be put off a lot more than I was—how he might feel he was not missing only a homely old noise but something that kept the whole life of him going, as the air does to your blood. It must have been so with McAvity. And if you put it at that it was good enough sense, by his lights, to get rid of his life in trying to keep it worth living.

A FATALIST

I

ALL day had the gardener been digging a hole to contain my new rose-bed. Night fell on a pit three feet deep: it had nice vertical sides; all over its floor had been spread a layer of rough stones, to perfect the drainage for the roses. The layer was some six inches deep. So there were still two feet and six inches of pit to fall into. However, my garden is, in a sense, private. So we hung up no red lamps round the hole.

At eleven that night I was lying in bed, thinking how little that's new there is under the sun. I had just reached the sombre conclusion that most of us hadn't even the wit to sin the old standard sins in some new sort of way, when I heard the unmistakable sound of a bit of dry wood crushed by somebody's boot in the garden under my window, where no man should be at that hour.

I live alone, and there is no other house within hail of my cottage. My ground floor windows are French, and very nice on warm afternoons, but they scarcely count among the serious bulwarks of property. Besides, I have a billiard table, and maintain the antique luxury of ivory balls; and persons versed in burglary will tell you that these are highly esteemed by the craft, as very few lines of stolen goods are so easy to market. Besides, we are all weak as water. So I guessed at once that some frail brother must have failed to overcome a desire for my billiard-balls.

I would not slay the meanest burglar that lives, merely for burgling. But I like scaring them. And, to gratify this simple taste, I have brewed, so to speak, a completely innocuous

brand of wind to put up them. I keep by my bed a tiny pistol, of a special kind, that is used for starting foot races. It can fire nothing but blank, for its muzzle is bunged up, from birth, with a steel plug. But, to make up for this disability, it has a small hole in the under side of the barrel. Through this hole the products of combustion escape with an admirable accession of sound and fury as often as the piece is discharged. Believe me, I have found this stingless fire-arm—emasculated but vociferous as the great Pistol himself, the patron saint of this description of ordnance—quite comically disturbing to the *moral* of the criminal classes, although it relieves me of all liability to the remorse that might follow any actual perforation of their persons.

Jumping out of bed and grasping this little champion of justice and also of mercy, I plunged down the stairs and issued in inhospitable haste from the back door. As I gained the open I spied a man in full flight. He was then about half-way from me to the rose-bed of the future, and the high speed at which he travelled was in no way diminished when I let fly with my little favourite.

If sound could kill single-handed, the wicked man would have perished there in his wickedness; for the 'listening Earth' that is described in the hymn might easily have had her ear-drum broken by that little hero's report. But he lived and headed straight, in his incautious terror, for the pit. At its edge he vanished utterly; and, when the roar of my artillery had died away, it was feebly succeeded by the groans and swear-words of an unquestionable casualty.

Rushing forward to improve my advantage I found that the unintended trap had quite settled the hash—the immediate and practical hash—of the foe. He was stretched at full length on the stones: that much I could see in the dark. But, as I

jumped after him into the pit, he cried out 'My foot! Mind my foot!' in a tone that fairly took my breath away, so widely did it differ from any tone that I could have expected from a condignly defeated invader.

The tone was neither menacing nor scared, nor yet imploring, but simply pettish and cross, like an invalid's when you don't put his pillows just right, or a child's when it says, 'You're hurting me' with the fullest conviction that this piece of news will desolate the person addressed and spur him to offers of instant relief. In fact I felt that spur. I felt it so distinctly that I bent down, without more ado, to examine the foot which the recumbent enemy extended to me.

I felt the foot all over. Its sole was facing the other leg, and the outside of the ankle bulged like a knee. This looked like dislocated ankle. But I knew that a wise surgeon will not start on treatment till he has given himself every chance that he can to diagnose rightly. So I told the patient, with authority, that he had better come indoors.

'Come!' he said pettishly, 'I can't get up!'

It was an educated voice, a super-educated one. And, now that I come to think of it, his very oaths had smelt of the lamp; they were pedantic. Besides, I had felt a slight pricking in my thumbs, such as usually visits me when I come near an intellectual, even one who is not a burglar. But I do read a little myself—of course nothing to speak of—just a few stale old things; and now it came into my head to rebuke this peevish trespasser in terms as bookish as his own. 'Well,' I quoted sternly, '"whence comes this restraint? From too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty."'

'Do you know,' he said, 'that's rather apt?' He spoke as if I were a boy who had shaped pretty well in a class, and he a master who could afford to unbend just a little. But not very

much, nor for long. In another moment he was again completely possessed by the tender regard that he had already shown for himself. ' But here are you,' he said, ' quoting from *Measure for Measure* to your satisfaction, while I bear the pangs of the damned.'

I might have followed up my first jibe with another. But somehow my flippancy froze on my lips. Surely I must be one of the most defenceless of men in any sort of verbal affray, or logical duel; any thrust or feint or parry that is addressed to me seems, just at the time, to have such extraordinary and unanswerable force. Certainly a crushing or scathing answer does sometimes occur to me afterwards, especially in bed. But at the time I am lost; I can only feel that in the high court of Reason I have lost my case and must, as the most dutiful of her subjects, put up my hands and accept whatever may arise from this surrender. ' You must wait here— ' I began.

' I must indeed,' he said acidly.

' — while,' I continued, ' I go for a light.'

One ought, by rights, to feel superior, when one is carrying on a sentence, like that, right over a needless or rude interruption by somebody else. But I got no joy of it. There was that in the voice of this sour Olympian which made me feel no words of mine to be up to the mark. I went for the light.

Half-way to the door the austere voice overtook me. ' You may or may not be aware,' it was saying, ' that shock, in the medical sense of the term, induces a chill. A rug, a sofa blanket, even a great-coat, if fairly thick——'

I grunted. But when I came back with a big stable lantern I had a motor rug over my shoulder and a large cushion in my other hand.

II

He did not take really well the frank brutality that it needs to get an ankle back into joint. No abuse, you understand, no direct attack on my methods; only a flow of oblique, refractive or ricochet comment, such as a grumpy 'Well, I suppose might is right in these cases,' and 'Small wonder the eminent bone-setters earn what they do if they have any gift for economising these tortures.'

I should have thought I had done pretty well, for a fellow that had not taken a course in first aid. But the touch of a master magician swiftly turned my little meal of self-complacency into some of the least tasty of sawdust. For several minutes after the ball of that ankle was back in its cup, a ground-swell of piquantly phrased innuendo, to my disadvantage, was slowly subsiding. Before I had quite got this scourge to my vanity laid out easy and snug, with my rug tucked well round his lean form, and my cushion doubled under his head, it was occurring to me that in less than ten minutes I had successfully recovered the offensive in this campaign and had then completely lost it. My present position was only slightly better than that of a hare in front of a swift car at night. Fascinated by the strong head-lights of this arrogant intellect, I could neither outpace it nor scuttle off out of its way.

Clearly there was nothing for it but a desperate push on my part to regain the upper hand that I had lost and—at least in some high and delicate sense—to make this caustic malefactor eat dust. 'Well,' I began, with this strategic purpose, 'about the object of this call of yours——?'

In replying, his voice went up an octave or two and thenceforward remained at the austerest heights of conscious

predominance in argument. 'In asking that,' he trebled, 'are you not, if I may say so, "breaking in an open door"?'

'We can't all break in closed ones,' I retorted—with some little gusto at first, for I felt it was quite a palpable hit. But—a plague on all big stable lanterns!—his face was visible now, and it wore that most withering of expressions—the absolute blank with which persons of culture and taste receive a false note struck by one of their inferiors—a feeble impropriety or a bad pun—as if their mercy were giving the culprit a chance to begin life again without having his licence endorsed.

My luckless repartee shrivelled instantly, in my own sight, into a coarse sample of the hard and dry lucidity of second-rate minds. I stood reproved while he continued, as though no indecency had occurred. 'Assume that I *was* about to do all that you hint. I do not offer one shade of denial. Assume anything, everything. Call me whatever you will; call me a ——'

'Pretty bad egg,' I muttered imprudently, for my vulgar wrath had revived a little under the tonic of my adversary's plenary admission of intent, as we say in the law.

He seemed to be really distressed by my commonness. His face was spare and rather sacerdotal, but not stoically so, and now his lips were parted and had a mixed look of petulance and pain, as if he might proceed either to scold or to cry. But, whatever weakness may have assailed him, he mastered his disappointment at my failure; he reasoned with me, if not patiently, at least with a measured and marshalled impatience. 'Do you seriously think,' he inquired, 'that that is what life really asks of you? To go about saying that this man is good, and that other man bad, in some strained moral sense? As if either of them could be either, when all that they

do is foredoomed and fixed for them, down to the least bend of a finger or toe, and a deed that smells sweet or foul to the nose of the mob is no more the feat or the fault of the doer than thorns are the fault of a rose or its scent a moral achievement.'

But there was still some rebellion left in me. '*Voilà les grandes phrases qui arrivent*,' I muttered profanely. Of course I had known before then the little fashion that some people follow of raising the dear old Greek notion of Fate from the dead—only the way they put it now is that the poor office-boy has to dip his hand, willy-nilly, into the till because some glandular secretion in his body has gone wrong. I can't keep up with all these fashions. Their birth and death rates are too high. So, in a general way, I am on the First Gravedigger's side and against Free Love and Free Suicide and the Free Till. I admitted as much.

'That,' he said with asperity, 'is the greatest mistake.' For the moment, however, he left it at that and said, in a way that made my face tingle for my deficiencies as a host, 'Would it be too much to ask that I may not have to tax my poor powers in clearing this up without *some* means of keeping a little warmth in my feet?'

Despise me if you must, but I was cornered. No adequate answer rose to my lips. And out of that corner I could perceive no way of escape except through my back door. In a minute or two I had collected a foot-muff, my second-best rug and the hot-water bottle out of my bed and had returned to the patient. He gave meagre thanks and took up his tale: 'Where were we? Oh!—about the old Free Will illusion——'

'Old?' I interposed as rudely as I dared. 'Is it as old as the Atreus Family Curse and the rest of your Ineluctable Destiny business?'

He overlooked my interruption as a Primate in the pulpit might ignore a very small brawl in the body of the church. 'Right? Wrong?' he resumed at his leisure. 'As if what matters in John Roe is that he's in the right, and in Thomas Doe that he's in the wrong! As if anything mattered, in either poor devil, except that, right or wrong, he is just what he is—a poor blown mote of dust who dreams he's the wind that blows him about—that he chooses his path and determines his acts and shapes his own character! As if it were open to me to worry myself with the fancy that it would have been in my power not to come to your house and fall into your pit!—or open to you to imagine it was an autonomous act of your own to seize a deadly weapon and fling yourself madly upon me, raging for blood!'

However he might have shaken my faith in any Free Will of my own, I had no doubt just then about the freedom of this philosopher's will as an agency for determining me. Hadn't he been shunting me all night, like the veriest truck for his goods, from siding to siding? Wasn't he, even now, by the infernal prestige of his brain, keeping me positively respectful? But he was proceeding: '—whereas all that is left to us—if there be anything—is to fall as little short as we may in sympathetic curiosity in presence of such pitiful playthings of natural forces as all of us are, whatever we may do, or seem to do.'

'In fact,' I murmured, 'when you seemed to have come here to pillage the place, I ought to have viewed the semblance with melancholy compassion?'

'Tinged,' he said, 'with humour. Humourless compassion for the common plight is a mood too purely Russian. See Tchekhov, Dostoievsky, all that lot. The English mind, at its best, has at least a wry smile for man's tragi-comic entangle-

ment. It does not overlook an element of the grotesque in the poor mob of helpless pigmies.'

The ill-conditioned element in me made one more try for liberty. ' And so,' I said, ' I might have allowed myself one little grin when you came this unfortunate cropper? '

' Doesn't it strike you,' he asked me augustly, ' that there is no truth, however profound, that does not lend itself to some flippant travesty? '

He paused a little—no doubt, to give me in fairness a chance to offer my excuses. I did not offer any. But the spell was working on me again. Never since I was at school have I been able to stick up for my own notions just at the moment when somebody else tries to come the giant intellect over me. Like an old soldier my mind instinctively jumps to attention, salutes, and listens for orders.

Perhaps he was giving me up as utterly graceless. ' The night grows colder,' he said somewhat distantly, 'and I am far from home, and am seriously injured. Something has, I think, been said, from time to time, about providing me with shelter, but nothing seems to be done.'

With an effort I lifted him on to the edge of the pit. Then I got out myself, raised him to his feet, or foot, and asked if he thought he could hop, with my assistance, into the house.

' I might,' he replied, ' but I doubt the wisdom of attempting it.' It was distinctly conveyed that if I had a sense of decency it would lead me to carry him.

Why make a stand there, after retreating so often? I submitted my back to the load. The theorist who had set out to break in at one of my windows, ' bent,' in the deathless words of Milton, ' to unhoard the cash,' entered luxuriously by the door, bestriding its owner and shedding about him a pungent aroma of intellectual force and of free, cantankerous will.

MAN AFRAID

'May he dream of the Devil and wak in a fright.'

Old Curse.

I

AS I walked to our village to-day, after breakfast, a big and handsome tramp was lying asleep on the strip of hot grass by the road. The high Midsummer sun shone benedictively down on the man's upturned face. But the face was troubled. Neither beer nor skittles could possibly have been the theme of that fellow's dreams. An hour later I came back that way. The wanderer still slept. But he had rolled over on to his front. His face was buried in the grass as a child buries his in a cushion, to shut out the sight of some frightful object.

I had to go down to the village again after luncheon. The tramp was sitting up now, with his back to a low wall of stones. He looked a degree more professional, too: he gave me good-day in the coming-on manner of competent tramps; nor did he hide a pipe which needed only tobacco and a match in order to achieve the highest purpose of its being. To render it easy for others to do what you wish is the essence of all diplomacy. This practitioner of the business made it perfectly easy for me to produce my pouch, followed by my matches, to hand them to him and then to fill my own pipe and to take a seat on the wall, not far from his head. But all this he did in a half-absent way, like a man who is waiting for some momentous hour to strike while he gives perfunctory chat to people round him.

Somebody in Homer says that all tramps come from God. I am not quite so sure. But some of them still talk the good

English that tastes like a nut, though the schools and the press are scouring it so swiftly off the face of this island. Besides, I was piqued by the odd way Black Care had eaten into this fellow's face. It was a face quite remarkably virile in shape. Indeed it was the face that sculptors, in all ages, seem to have agreed to give to Roman private soldiers. And it was burnt a very deep, rich, even brown. He only needed a helmet, of the right make, to resemble a classic warrior done in bronze—except that his countenance had acquired one of the completest sets of taut, minute and circumstantial wrinkles that I had ever seen, bar photographs of aged Cardinals and portraits by Rembrandt.

II

From the grand weather our talk shifted round to the vagabond's past. It was I made it shift. He showed no itch to be gabbing or bucking, like most of us middle-aged men, about the uncommonness of his youth—and that though most of his forty-eight years had clearly been active; these lives that are given to action in their spring are apt to be given, in their autumn, still more plenteously to words. I had to draw from him forcibly, as with a corkscrew, that he was born in the County Kildare, where all the talk is of horses; that his mother had died at his birth; and that his father had taken him out, at the age of some two years, to New South Wales.

There, at the ripe age of ten, my new friend's first adventure had matured. As he recalled it, a little animation came into his voice. He was to ride a rogue horse which his father's employer had entered for an up-country handicap on the flat. This malignant was given the minimum weight—5 st. 6 lb.—in justice to an inveterate hobby it had of stopping,

half-way through a race, in order to savage its jockey at leisure in that quiet part of the course. My man's eye began to take light now, as he revived the state of expectation in which he had thrown his infant leg across this carnivorous animal. His voice quickened.

' " What you got to do, Gnat O'Brine," says the master to me, " is jus' get 'im off, if you can, an' then sit on 'im, sly-like an' secret. Let 'im think you ain't there. 'Ide from 'im, that's a good boy, so's 'e won't bite your knees off."

' I kep' myself out of his thoughts so successf'ly that we were left at the post for a consid'rable time. Then that tiger percaived that the others were gone, an' off he went beltin' after, wishful to kick them. You don't know Australian racin' —no? Well, it's little ye lose. An Australian course is nothin' at all, only dust. Be the time we were movin', there wasn't a horse to be seen in the world; only a fat cloud of dust—it hid all. We lep' into the back of that cloud, like a boy leppin' over a fire of weeds in a field, and it smoking sulky. From that out I saw nothin' at all for a very long while, savin' one pair of heels that gev a fling up at us out of the fog of the dust an' flicked me kind Angel of Death on the nose. That med him madder than ever to butcher the whole of the field. Now, if only he had a low motive to show ut, that horse was a flyer. He flew an' he flew, seekin' prey, till, be cripes, the fog thinned to our front, an' out we came into the light of day, with the crowd on th' off side of us screamin' " The cannibal wins," an' the red winning-post slidin' past on me left, before that divvil discovered his error an' offered to ait me. Hurt, do ye say? Is ut frikened? Not a tittle. Ye know where ye are with a horse.'

While he recalled the old race I could almost see the fumes of a happy intoxicant rise to his brain. Before he began he had

been like a man who suspects that the crust of the earth may be only a trap-door, to let him down into a pit underneath. Then, when he warmed to his story, you might suppose he had quite forgotten the pit. But at the end of the story the cheerful glow seemed to fade from him quickly. He was the man on the trap-door again. 'The time ye'd be frikened,' he said with conviction, not to say gloom, 'is the time ye'd not know where ye are, an' the time there's nothin' at all to do in the world, only think of the power of things do be waiting to hurt you.' He puffed his pipe with an air of the darkest determination. A man looks like that when he wants tobacco to help him to drive away care, but is not at all sure that the enemy won't down the two of them.

III

I had to say something or other. I asked, did O'Brine strike it rich, after that, on the plan of letting them run their own race?

'For three years an' a bit,' he said, quite dully now, 'I was a jockey be trade—first on the flat, an' then over the sticks, me weight growing excissive.'

I could believe it. Lean as he is to-day, he must still weigh thirteen stone good.

O'Brine viewed me and my vain curiosity with melancholy eyes, like Age watching sadly the blundering capers of blindfolded Youth. 'A gran', stirrin' life, would ye think ut? Ye'd be astounded to feel the tejiousness of ut the time ye were that aisy in doin' the work that your mind 'd be free to bedivvil itself with worryin' over the turrible things that are loose in the world—aye an' you in the act, it mebbe, of takin' a very enjoyable lep.'

To my poor plain mind this seemed a hard saying. I asked did he mean that his nerve would give way at a jump?

The notion evidently struck him as absurd. 'Ach! not at all. Ye'd know where ye were with a hurdle. The divvil and all of ut was that the leppin' itself got to be no distraction at all from the state I was in. I'd have the fear on me, an' me goin' over a fence an' a brook, as voilent as if I were walkin' about in the fields with nothin' to take me mind off.'

Ah! I began to see now. 'The end of ut was,' he went on, 'that I ran away to sea in desprit hopes of routin' the tim'rousness out of me. For a year an' a half I folla'd the sea; an' mebbe ye'll think me an ijjut, an' mebbe ye'll see what I mean, when I say there was only a week of that time when me mind had seren'ty an' rest, an' that was a foul-weather week we were roundin' the Horn wid a very fair share of the cargo on fire. It's not that I've ever been one o' the fools do be askin' for dangers—God knows it's safety I'm chasin', the whole of me life. An' yet those were the good days, the Divvil knows why.'

His large eyes were regaining their lustre. 'That fire was deep away down in the hold; no way to reach it at all; an' there it stayed, burnin' and burnin' away till a good fourth part o' the ship was a match for a kettle—only kep' from bein' perished and all of red-hotness be havin' water one side of itself though the fire's the other. A grand wind was blowing; it kep' the tub well on the roll, the way her port plates would no sooner be gettin' as red as a horse's shoe in a forge than th' entire port side of her'd dip pretty nigh gunwale-under so's the sea'd be hissin' with steam, an' the ship's dhrunken colour quickly rejuced. It was work, work, work, for the pack of us, bestin' the fire an' bestin' the sea; but all the time ye were at it ye knew where ye were an' your life was singin' itself like a

chune. But what's a week in a year an' a half? Nothin' at all.'

O'Brine's face had fallen again. As I saw it I pictured the glow dying off the ship's side when the cold water rose to it. Lifelessly he continued. 'For anny man who'd be apt to take fright at the world, the sea is no place to be on. Hours an' hours there'll be at a time, an' you waitin' there for an order to come, an' your mind lyin' out unprotected for anny ol' dread that would rush at it out of nowhere at all. In me terror I quitted the sea an' went back to me fawther, the way of the Prodigal Son, to take the beltin' I knew I should get, an' look after the pigs an' the poulthry.

'For a year I enjured ut. An' then—ye know the way that it is with a boy. Annywhere else in the worl', excep' just where he is! Everywhere else is the place where the great doin's are an' the dragons are waitin' for him to put ut all over them an' to obtain the peace that the worl' cannot give. An' then Ballon's Circus came round.

'Ach! that was the circus! Lions an' bears an' an el'phant itself, an' Ballon giving ut out he was seeking a steady apprentus to managing lions an' bears. Then I knew in the wink of an eye it was this I'd been wanting, the whole of a year. Sick I had been with the fear of the Divvil knows what at the pit of me stomach. When that is the case the wan thing that'll give you your aise is having ut out with a beast or a sea or a fire or anny ol' thing that'll keep you busy an' happy endeav'rin' not to be killed. An' that's how I couldn't resist having thruck with the lions.'

I asked how the cure had answered.

'Cure? There's no cure in ut,' he said discontentedly. 'Lions are not what ye read in the papers at all. Ye'd think, by the way people talk, every lion ye'd meet would be raging

to eat ye. He is not. It's mere van'ty. Why, what in the name o' good sinse, is a man to a lion? A middlin' piece of beef, done up in a sthringy ould bundle of clothes. Put yourself in his place. Would ye rush at a good chop itself, an' it smothered in flannels an' tweeds would wring the teeth out of your head? No more would a lion, with good naked meat to be had, an' he used to captiv'ty an' quit of the foolish ambish'n the wild lions do have to do their own killing always. Lions! Nothing *to* them. An' so I schemed an' contrived till they shifted me pitch from tamin' lions to walking a rope of the Blondin or out-door vari'ty—walking an' cap'ring an' wheeling a barrow, that has a great groove to its wheel, along a monsthrous cable forty feet up in the air, or a hundhred itself, to suit the surroundin's.'

'Well?' I inquired, with sympathy. Could there be nothing risky enough to quench the thirst of this 'timorous' man for perils to outface?

'Only the ould, ould story,' he avowed ruefully. 'Danger, is ut? No, but a fraud on the public. Anny time that ye're out in the street the sthrip of pavement ye'd use would not be the width of a rope-walkin' rope. An' what good would ye get from the rest of the street? An' what's more, d'y' ever hear of a man, or a woman itself, bein' killed be walkin' a rope—aye or swallowin' fire or swords? No, an' nobody has, in th' entire histhory of the world, though there's men droppin' dead on the flat of the road every day, or falling under the cars. An' the reason is plain. A hundhred feet up in the air is a hundhred good reasons for givin' your mind to what ye're about an' not leaving it go tormintin' itself about the precar'sness of human affairs. The soul of you's filled an' at peace, instid of the poor way it's in when there's nothin' at all has got to be done an' your inside is empty an'

swep' an' invitin' every terr'fyin' divvil that's loose in the world to come in an' desthroy. So I was in Hivvin the time I was learning me stunts on the rope, an' li'ble to slip. But the instiant I had the trade learned, so's I couldn't fall off if I tried, all the good of ut came to an end an' me sense of secur'ty was ruined.'

Neither I nor my printer possesses the means of emphasis needed to give you any measure of the bitter earnestness that rasped in the urgently logical voice of O'Brine. He then paused for a while and viewed with a profound uneasiness the pastoral tranquillity of western Oxfordshire. The man's immense virility of body, his Roman legionary face, his look of lifelong converse with astringent winds and cheerful suns, and then his stricken sense of some infinite, unfixable and unaccountable unfriendliness hemming him in like an atmosphere—all these together formed a tragi-comic contrast that kept me piqued and curious. Somehow I knew that if an armed madman, eager to kill, had come down the road at that moment, O'Brine would have got up and stopped him while I should have tried to look as if I had not observed the phenomenon. And yet I had a quiet mind, as minds go, while fear gnawed O'Brine. 'Very apt I'd ha' been,' he resumed, 'to go mad if the War hadn't come, to bring me a little disthraction.'

IV

Yes, I had just been wondering what the big smash might have brought to a being like this—imperturbable while any actual danger gave him its tiger jaws to look into, and yet so perturbed when that strong pick-me-up was not to be had. I asked him.

He answered sombrely at first. 'The War? Be all I've

heard, there was great excitement in Europe—men bein' hayroes an' every sort of gran' hullabaloo. But we were out and away at the back of beyant, in German East Africa. All the plain stuff that there was in the War must ha' been dumped in East Africa. Every year we bet the Germans: some diff'rent gen'ral went back every year to the great worl' an' said that he'd won. An' then another came out. Schultz said it loudest, so he got the glory. But divvil a German could anyone see, an' no fightin' at all. So I wangled me way to a hospital ordherly's job where promotion was good because most of the lot were weak creatures would not last a fortnight, but if ye did that ye might live the duration.'

As he spoke a faint spark was kindling again in O'Brine's joyless eye. He went on, the spark brightening a little. 'Four grand huts there were to that hospital, an' they were spesh'lised intinsely. Each disease went into the hut that became it. All the chol'ra an' dysenthry cases in one. They had Epsom salts. All the shiv'rers were put in another. Theirs was quinine. The ones that were tied up in knots had a hut to themselves because they were going surely to die, for they had sleeping sickness. Cases couldn't be asked how they felt, because they had thirty-five diff'rent languages, every one of them diff'cult, an' me an' the Med'cal Off'cer had English only. I'd go round in the morning an' count what had died in the night, an' then we'd go after the beasts an' the butterflies in the bush—ye see, the M.O. was a great man of sci'nce—an' then I'd go round the wards in the evening again.

'There was nobody lived very long in that place. It was right up agin the Equator. A donkey would die in three weeks. There were four hundred beds in me hospital an', on an average, twenty would die in a night. Me first commandant died in five weeks. He was the butterfly man. Me

second stuck it out a full six weeks before we buried him. I was the only Eur'pean that didn' peg out in one way or another.'

The eyes of O'Brine were growing almost brilliant. He was no longer peering at the sun-filled landscape as if it might bite him. He went on with increasing gusto. 'The fact is, ye had to be careful. Wheriver the temp'rachure in the sun is a hundhred an' forty, there's this, that an' th' other attimptin' to play little games wi' you. Flies come an' lay their eggs under your skin. There's a bean has a pollen will irr'tate your face till I've seen a man lep into water was crawlin' with crocodiles, just to be quit of the itch of ut. Then there's puff adders will lie on the groun' in the shadows be moonlight an' offer to bite at your leg the way you're due to die in the nex' fifty seconds. But all ye'd need to do is just to be careful.'

For the first time O'Brine was talking with absolute relish. He went on expanding. 'F'rinstance, far too much is made of the pythons they have in those parts. Divvil a python will hurt ye as long as he hasn't a sizeable branch of a tree to belay himself to, with a bend of his tail, the way he can lever the whole of his stren'th out to squash ye. That's how a man knows where he is with a python. Hol' down his tail an' ye have him perplexed, for want of the lev'rage. Besides, he's a mod'rate eater, desirin' a meal not above twice or three times in a twelvemonth—about a goat at a time—an' then he'll swallow ut whole and the horns of the goat do be stickin' out far, through the skin of the python, till the digestive proceedin's inside will dhraw the flesh off from all roun' the roots of the horns, an' the horns dhrop away from th' outside of the python's abdomen, an' so he's all right. With an an'mal like that, one that's not rushin' up an' down daily, ragin' for victuals, there's no insecur'ty to speak of.'

For the moment O'Brine was rattling away with the whole-hearted delight of any good Irishman in a good course of adventure. He even went on, without pressing, to a new chapter of his experiences. 'Some o' the natives were lads, an' no questhion. One day I was sitting alone in the hospital yard an' a mob o' them came rushin' in. Ravin' they were, an' foamin', fit to wear bibs. No off'cer bein' on duty, they did the whilla-balooin' at me that knew sorra a word of the five-an'-thirty lingoes they swore in. However, I'd heard from me infancy out, how dimmocracy was the plan of lettin' everyone talk at the top of his voice before doin' the thing that came into your head. So I dimmocratised them. I had them shoutin' the odds for a space of two hours, an' me givin' the shindy a very fair hearin', as if I were takin' it in, an' then I gev out, be the language of signs, they must dig me a hell of a trench to bury the dead we had in the place. That set them off roarin' with laughter, the Divvil knows why, an' they went off an' did ut. 'Twas manny days later I heard they'd come up to destroy ev'ry soul because some black quarter-master was thievin' their rations. I was surprised. There hadn't been annythin' terr'ble about them at all. Th' absurdity was that they gev me a medal'—I saw that he wore, almost out of sight on his waistcoat, the treasurable ribbon of the D.C.M., which always means stout work—'for "quellin' at th' outset a dang'rous native risin'." It was the greatest mistake.'

His voice had filled out while he spoke of the riot. It was a wondrous fine voice, indescribably manly, like those of some great tenor singers and some wind instruments. And then, when he spoke again, the voice's round fulness had sagged into something argumentative and almost pettish. 'As if annyone didn't know where he was with a nigger! The time

ye've a right to be given a medal for livin' at all is the time ye're up agin nothing on earth, but the fear's in yourself, the way a man would have thirst in himself though porter an' beer an' every partic'lar drink that there is had never been made—only the thirst of him achin' out into space, an' fear is the same.'

The kindly fumes that had risen to gladden his brain while his recollections of sun-stroke and pestilence, murderous reptiles and murderous men, possessed him, had passed away utterly now.

V

From the place where we sat I could see nothing to scare any man. Beyond the very low wall on the other side of the road, the ground fell away in a long easy slope. At the foot of the slope, unseen among trees, I knew the infant Thames to be playing quietly in his nursery, nine miles away. Far beyond that, and the sylvan Vale of White Horse, one's eyes came to rest on the dim blue that blurred Lambourn Down. Rest, rest—everything had rest. No air was stirring. Half-way down the sky the sun himself seemed to have turned as lazy as everything else: he paused for a while on his way. Warm, pensive and indolent, all the visible landscape lay outstretched and basking. Quite unsuspiciously it accepted the golden day's benediction. 'Well, it feels pretty safe here,' I said, very sincerely.

He turned his head quickly. I found his eyes curiously searching. 'Are ye sure?' he said shrewdly. 'Wouldn't ye think it would be jus' the time that the will of God would be sloshin' down at the two of us out of the sky, an' it the blue that it is?'

In the sabbatical peace of the hour I heard the familiar

voice of one of my own hens, far, far away, rejoicing sleepily that unto her an egg was born. 'Why bother about the off chance of a knock?' I said. 'What can we do?'

'An' isn't that jus' the bother?' he argued tormentedly. 'If there was even the teeniest whiff of a smell of anny partic'lar danger, ye'd know where ye were, an' what to mind out for. The dreadfullest danger there is, an' the one that ye can never be quit of, is not knowin' what to mind out for.'

I brooded on that. In the course of my brooding there came to my mind a beautiful road, lined with trees, that runs into the town of Arras. During part of the War it was looked down upon by many invisible enemies' eyes. So it lay out in the sun for at least a whole summer, shunned like something accursed, all its excellent surface touched by no feet except those of the terror that walketh by noon-day. Well, this goodly frame the earth, I mused, must have become like that road for this luckless O'Brine. No: much worse. For at Arras the peril that could not be seen had at least an easily imaginable form: O'Brine would probably have exulted in bluffing the hidden Fritz snipers. Only here, in the deep peace of an idyllic countryside, could the malign infestation of space reach its dread maximum of ungraspable vagueness. Wherever his uncommon sensibility to fear found any solid object of apprehension to deal with, he was already well on the way to relief; the need for instant action set him free and made him tranquil. A lion, a python, a foundering ship or a race in the dark on a man-eating horse—any of these would let loose the passion and power to fight the thing through. The trouble only returned when every palpable object of terror was gone. Then the man's power of fearing would 'race' like the screw of a ship when it has no water against which to put forth its strength.

O'Brine was positively haggard by this time. I never saw a man further away from the blest state of those devotees who can say with the uttermost force of belief 'The Lord is my keeper' and go about honestly feeling that they are looked after in their goings out and in their comings in. O'Brine had become like a man who at any moment might cry out 'Help! Help!' The fear staring out of his eyes was so real that—well, it almost seemed to compromise all the pleasant things round us, since this was the best they could do for a great healthy Hercules of a man who had given his proofs by land and sea, fire and air. Even I, stolid lump as I am, felt that the fair scene was becoming a little unnerved under the intense suspicion of his gaze: his fear breathed so hard as to tarnish the mirroring candour of day. I had to shiver a little, for all the mothering warmth of that afternoon sun.

The tormented O'Brine must have come to the end of his power of taking rest. He gave a half roll-over from his seat, to lever up his stiff body. 'I must be leggin' it on,' he said, 'into Lechlade.'

I offered the farewell gifts of a friend. These he received with the courtesy of his nation. But what could I give? Only a short-lived command of the bread, the beer and the 'baccy that perish—not liberation, even for a moment, from the curiously compounded self which is one's fate. However, he gave handsome thanks: 'May the blessing of God stay with ye always an' keep the fear from ye.'

I watched him slouching down the white road rather hurriedly, with his great shoulders much bent. He looked far more than forty-eight, from behind. Black Care must weigh a lot, I thought. And no hope of relief for the poor devil, either, unless a bull with a temper should break loose on the road, or fire or small-pox visit some casual ward where he lay.

TED'S LEAVE

I

'TELL me honestly, Fred, is it as light as it should be?' my cousin Helen asked, with grave eyes, when I had tasted the cake. Helen was giving me tea in her cottage. It's a real cottage—not a titbit of luxury nicknamed 'The Hut' or 'The Shack,' but just the cheapest bit of cover that Helen could find when her husband Jack Aimes and his income were killed in the War. Helen is forty-four now, to my fifty.

'You see,' she explained, 'it's a kind of cake that Ted used to like when he was little. It came from a shop in those days. But now I'm trying to make it.'

'Hullo!' I said. 'Ted coming home?' This Ted was the only child of Helen and Jack. From school he had gone out into the great world, six years before, to slay such dragons and giants as he might meet in the counting-house of a big trading company in West Africa.

'Isn't it glorious?' she said, with a glow in her face. 'His first leave! He's sailing in the *Timbaru*, next Monday. Think of it—three months of having him here! Isn't it wonderful?'

As she spoke, Helen's brown eyes looked almost glazed—I think with a kind of high ecstasy held very taut. I had seen people looking like that in Russia—country people, almost unimaginably simple-minded. They used to stop you on the road on Easter morning and say, 'Christ is risen!' just as if they were Mary telling the disciples about it and saying, 'Isn't it wonderful?'

As a cousin more like a brother, I used to see Helen at

least once a week. The next time I called I saw on the table a map of Africa and a *Times* with the 'Shipping Intelligence' to the fore. 'Fearful extravagance,' she avowed. 'I'm taking *The Times* for a whole fortnight, so as to know where Ted is, every day.'

She had a list of the *Timbaru's* ports of call, all the way home—Accra, Seccondee, Monrovia, Freetown, Bathurst and so on. She was spotting such things as a guide-book would probably star at each place, views of 'Teneriffe and Atlas unremoved' and the like, in order to gloat over her vision of Ted seeing them on his way. Ted, she explained, had always had the seeing eye, the artist's eye, the eye that fills things with fineness. 'Once, when he was tiny, he couldn't remember the word "sunflowers," so he called them "flowers—*you* know—the ones the bees buzz about in." Wasn't it vivid? He used to imagine the look of all sorts of far-away places. One evening that we were out in the garden—he was eight then—he suddenly said to me "I suppose at this time in America the young wolves will be just beginning to yawn in their lairs, and the Indian corn will be sprouting in the cool air." It almost frightens me sometimes—he will have seen so many marvellous things in that wonderful way. How shall I ever be able to make it not dull for him to be with me for three months?' I could see she was 'reading up' hard, coaching herself to be an intelligent listener when the young god should speak of his travels.

The week after that it was all Lisbon and Vigo, Corunna and Cherbourg. Only a week now and Ted would be at Southampton. When Helen spoke of this climax the sunken beauty of her youth surged up again into her face; she was translated and glorified like a girl when she knows her first love is returned.

I asked might I take her in my little car to meet the *Timbaru* at Southampton. But Helen said 'No' in a way that showed me how she had got the whole business worked out in her mind, each turn and possible circumstance. Clearly she thought Ted might find it less trying to meet her at the cottage door than among a shipload of strange people. But one thing she did ask for, gravely and eagerly—that I would meet Ted at Shilbury Station. Of course, she said, he could walk the five miles from there, and the milkman bring the luggage. But the least snobbish of women coveted for Ted the genial feel of a fortunate traveller's homing to country places in England—the friend with an expectant face among the station-master's roses, the car waiting ready in the white dust of the yard—every little circumstance of welcome that feeds the circumstantial hunger of home-coming hearts.

Just wouldn't I? But the boat was made late by a storm in the Bay, and then Ted wired that he must go straight up to town from the boat—'Imperative business London'—and then there was not a word more for three days. But the fourth day brought balm: Ted would reach Shilbury Station that evening at five.

II

I was there early. And the train was late. So I had time to think quite a lot about Ted as I patrolled the down platform.

He had been a child of promise, a marvellous child. I begin to think that every first-born child of ingenuous parents is that. For Helen and Jack the only question was whether Ted should be Premier, Primate, Commander-in-Chief, or simply a great poet.

They found him manly beyond all belief. When he was only four, and used to delve in a cart-load of sand, he came

stumping across the garden to Helen, his brow shining with honourable sweat, to show her the wooden spade that he had stuck upright in the sand. 'You notus, Muvver,' he said, 'how men leave their spades?' Besides, he was a wit. Had he not said, when rebuked for his infant greed, 'How *can* you 'xpect me to wait till all the fizzy drink has 'vaporated into other people's glasses.'

Of course such a prodigy had to be given his chance, in the most liberal sense—the best of prep-schools, public schools, universities, everything. For Helen and Jack the provision of these aids to greatness was not too easy to be exciting. Jack was the London cashier of a West African Company: much gold passed through his hands, but all that stuck there was quite a lean salary. So there had to be managing here and managing there. Jack took out an 'education endowment policy' to defray the coming school bills. This meant premiums, but Helen and Jack abolished their summer holiday at a mountain farm in the Lakes; also their cheap seats once a week at the great Queen's Hall concerts. That financed the school years. As to the university, Jack meant to fight, tooth and nail, all the school years for more promotion and pay. Besides, Ted would be winning, by then, the scholarships that were clearly his due.

This scheme might have worked very well, for all that I know, if the War had not knocked out its corner-stone, which was Jack. It left Helen and Ted to live on a pension of eighty pounds a year and a grant of a hundred and fifty for each year till Ted should leave school. The grant was the wreath that the West African Company laid on the grave of its cashier. But it did even more. It said that if Ted minded his book and left school with a character he might hope to ascend a high stool in the office at Lagos.

I had known Helen first as a girl having a good time in a rich father's house. She was then an undeniable grouser—all but a shrew. She 'couldn't bear' this, and she 'wouldn't stand' that, and her pet way of telling you things was to start with a sigh and 'I *am* so distressed—' or 'I'm so disappointed—' I have not heard one of these formulas from her since the great Ted was born; and from the day the smash came she has been the most patient woman I know—she had always been the most beautiful. 'The more you beat 'em the better they'll be,' is an old thing to say about women, but Fate tried it well out on Helen and found it was true. It was as if she had never quite got the full run of all the fine stuff that was in her till good times were gone and her world tumbling to pieces. There wasn't a whine about her when she was throwing up the relative comfort of Wimbledon after Jack's death, cutting off the last hope of hearing their beloved Beethoven greatly played, and taking that charmless cottage in Wiltshire, there to typewrite in solitude and privation during Ted's terms at Chellingham School.

Ted was all right. That endowment policy looked after *him*. So did that grant. Helen would not put a coin of these funds to any use that was not for the whole, sole, special good of Ted. She ran the house and herself on her pension and on the fruits of the typewriting. Very small and skinny fruits they were, for Helen couldn't be got to see that in business you have to take thought for yourself as well as your customers. But the clover was thick where Ted pastured. I did think at times that he threw himself almost too warmly into Helen's devices for keeping it thick. But I suppose we were all pretty beastly in that way when we were his age. I used to chafe a little, too, at a way he had of grumbling about her preoccupation with kitchen affairs and food prices. He seemed to think

this was rather low of her. He had once shown signs of positive horror when some Chellingham friend was expected to look in at the cottage. But Helen felt sure that 'deep down' his heart was all right. And the West African Company had not found fault with it when the time came for Ted to embrace man's estate as the most junior of its clerks. And of course one couldn't be critical now, with the boy just coming home.

III

The little sequence of sounds had begun which usher a train into Shilbury Station—the tinkling in a signal box, the double joggle of a lever, the wooden flop of the red arm at the end of the platform, and then the puffing of the train, still unseen but audibly toiling up the long valley from the last station, and ceasing to puff as it glides into view round the last corner, its smokeless engine framed in an arch. A few more seconds and you may be seeing a face take light at sight of your own.

No such face could I find as the windows slid past. Could Ted have missed it? The only persons I saw getting out were a cross-looking couple—a man of no age that you could guess and a woman cadaverously white. The woman's age, too, might have been any from twenty to forty. The man detrained first, glowered round, saw the one porter that Shilbury has, and hailed him uncivilly. 'Hi! you there, get out this stuff.'

He pointed into the carriage he had left. In its open door the chalk-faced woman was still standing, with a piece of luggage in each hand. 'You *might* help me down,' she said to the man. His own hands were empty.

By this time, however, the man was busy, staring at me,

and I back at him. I was being convinced, against the whole force of my desire, that this discourteous male was some new and distorted version of Ted.

The poor wretch reeked of dull raffishness. It was like garlic. Every look and tone smelt of it—all that he did, all that he said, all that he wore. 'Ho, ho! The famed Uncle Fred, I believe,' was his greeting to me. 'I've got a nice little cough-drop for you.'

He turned to the whited woman, now out the train. 'Come on parade, Billie,' he said with a leer, and she stepped forward, nervous, tight-lipped and resolute.

'Don't have a stroke, Uncle Fred,' he went on, 'when I present to you my newly wedded wife.'

She was a heart-rending sight. Her face was a whited sepulchre; one wondered what sort of complexion was buried there, painted to death long ago. She was short and alarmingly thin. You might produce something like the queer ghastliness of her looks by whitewashing all that remained of a pretty little house completely gutted by fire: of what must have once been a pretty figure and face there were left the outer walls and the skeleton plan, all carefully powdered dead white.

A total brute, in my place, would have written her off as a common bad lot, a quite untouchable specimen of the 'strange woman' we read of, 'whose house is the way to Hell, going down to the chambers of death.' I did certainly think of that personage. But also the small percentage of me that is not mere brute thought of some little animal trying hard not to be killed—a small spider fallen into an emptying bath and fighting, all alone with its terror, against the swirling suction of the water that drags it down, to be drowned in a sewer.

Where had Ted picked her up? Oh! anywhere, I supposed, in any old night-club, any such market as he had rushed up from the boat to attend, on that 'imperative business' of his. One thing I was sure of, I can't tell you why—that the two had not known each other a week.

The little local train was shambling on out of the station by now, slightly wagging its tail in its old homely way, as if it had brought us no curse and woven no web across Helen's sun. And already my theory of the case was taking shape. In some orgie after his landing Ted must have butted into a prostitute bitten with a desire to get out of Hell and the chambers of death and the rest of it—to be like other women, have a private husband of her own and go quite straight. And she must have laid hold of Ted and got him to marry her.

I had bowed, on Ted's introduction, and Billie had held out a hand and given me a hot grip that felt at first like an entreaty. Then it slacked off suddenly as if she feared she might have done the wrong thing. I diagnosed a fierce hunger to do the right thing, the thing a 'nice' woman would do in like case, and also spasms of mistrust. She was like a stray cat which has been starved and chivied so long that it has lost faith in the plan of coming up to you simply with a loud purr and a cordial wave of the tail. No doubt such a cat will still crave to be stroked as other cats are, but so many people have held out a hand, and then only hurt it, that it has grown wary.

There was no time to think, though. Helen's fall had to be broken, so far as might be. While we were loading the car I tried to think how. She was not on the 'phone, but a neighbour was, and had pressed Helen to use it at need. And here was need verily. So, when I had the two safe in the car, I doubled back into the station on some lying excuse and saw my friend the station-master in the booking-office.

He was a brick: he will assuredly be rewarded in Heaven. He went right out of his own citadel, leaving all his tickets and the whole till at my mercy, while I rang up that neighbour and begged her to get hold of Helen. She told me to hang on while she tried, so I stood with the thing at my ear and looked into a little coal-yard and over a hedge white with dust to the brown goodness of fields full of ripening corn and I can tell you it all seemed to be aching with pain. But I didn't have long to look. Helen must have come running, in her elation: I heard her fluttering breath as she said she was there.

'Helen,' I said, just bungling along, 'it's all right. He's here. And—what do you think?—the rogue has got married—just done it, offhand. Don't they say it's what all these young people do now? The bride's here too, of course. Small, very quiet, rather pale. Now, there's a speaking portrait for you. Helen. Helen! Are you all right? Sure? Good-bye, Helen—must go to them now.'

She had made scarcely a sound while I spoke. These women have all the endurance. Ours is nothing. I suppose they're all one, in a way, and the millions of millions of child-births have drilled them in fortitude, while we have only had little pin-pricks like battles to stand—and the sight of their torments. I went out into that aching beauty of summer and the English evening, the cottage roses and the sunny corn—all a lovely misery now like a butterfly's wings when a boy has impaled it alive on a pin.

IV

Helen's garden was five feet above the road level: a few wooden steps led up to a white wooden gate. The moment the car stopped I said to Ted 'Jump out. She's at the door,

and he had the wit to be quick: so Helen met him before we others were out of the car or could see.

Billie didn't like that. I could feel she didn't. I think she took fright when cut off from Ted for so much as a minute: Ted was the lifebelt: Ted had to be clung to: no wave must wash them apart. Yet I felt, too, that she was burning to play her part, to bring off the great moment and not fetch out a false note. It was so pitiful that I couldn't help whispering to her, 'She's kind. Don't be afraid. She'll be good to you.'

Billie peered at me cautiously: it was as if she were wondering where the trick was in my words. But she did what she had to: she got out and went up the steps. Then I heard her say, 'How do you do, Mrs. Aimes?' with a rather dreadfully guarded politeness.

'Won't you let me kiss you?' Helen said. She had come down to the gate open-armed, with the tender brown of her eyes heavenly soft and no grain of reserve in her eagerness to give love and see worthiness.

The little white creature seemed at first to be uncontrollably moved. She returned Helen's embrace with a sudden vehemence that was almost convulsive. Then, just as suddenly, she went chill, as though she had just got the tip from some devil that these kisses, like others she knew of, were only made to bait traps with.

Helen's face showed no mark of a blow. 'And now you'll let me show you your wee room,' she said, and Billie was led away, giving Ted an agonised glance, as if she had only to lose sight of him and she would be driven straight to the slaughter. And yet she went: she did not actually shy. Helen's touch seemed to be working upon her, Heaven knows how. She reconnoitred Helen with quick curious glances; she seemed to be bewildered and shaken by what she was seeing—as if she

had not known there were Helens and couldn't help doubting it still.

Ted gave no visible heed to his partner's alarm. In fact he gave help to none of us in the acting of this pretty scene that he had composed for us all. As mariners say, he stood off and rode easy and left the two women to meet as they might and to make what they could of each other. But when the door closed behind them he gave me a look of much knowingness. 'Women are so beastly complicated, aren't they?' he said.

'Your mother isn't,' said I—pretty curtly, I fancy.

He gave me a pitying stare. 'Gad!' he said, 'if you only knew women!' It was distinctly implied that in this event there would be immeasurable additions to my present equipment. Like many other poor piggies he seemed to imagine that his particular wallowings in the sty had been a tremendous experience and had given him a singular knowledge of all the ways and reactions of some freakish monster whom he called 'women.'

I went out for the luggage. As I came in with the last bit of it, Helen the servantless was hastening down to the kitchen to see the festal supper through the last chapter of its long preparatory history. To give her a free hand for this climax I loafed in the garden, near the door, ready to keep the young people in play while Helen dished up.

The couple came downstairs together, Billie at Ted's heels. This seemed to be their fixed marching formation. When they were at the halt she kept her eyes fastened on his. If they ever left him they soon quivered nervously back, as if fatal slips might occur at any moment when she was out of touch with the Higher Command.

I showed off the glories of the garden—chiefly London Pride, moon daisies and nasturtiums. You can grow these

without a large fortune. Ted touched on this point. 'I see,' he observed, 'we're not trying to knock out Kew Gardens.'

I think Billie inferred, from the caustic smile which accompanied this, that it must be wit; for she broke into a high hysterical titter. Then she saw, perhaps, that I was not holding my sides; for the loyal titter expired on her lips like a thing blasted by some sudden angel of death, and she went back to saying 'How prettee!' at every flower that I showed her till Helen came out, flushed with her toils at the fire and bright-eyed with the excitement of bringing Ted in to consume her passionately practised handiwork.

'Will all you good people come into the kitchen?' she said. 'We have supper there.'

Ted crowed facetiously: 'Ho, ho! the kitchen. Hey for the kitchen. Lead the way, Mother.'

At that moment I could have kicked the great Ted. It wasn't the words; it was the tone which seemed to imply that to eat in the kitchen was a low act and had to be passed off jocosely as an old woman's quaint hobby. Still, I did nothing overt, and Billie took her cue from Ted in a flash and set up again her little high-pitched titter.

Not many of us, I fancy, really live for great ends or high abstract ideals. We live for a few intensely imagined moments of future joy. And here, as I believe, was the moment that Helen had dreamt of and planned for six years: her wish was given her and she stood at the foot of the rainbow that she had pursued, with that vacant squeal in her ears.

Ted kept it up well, in the jocular vein. I guessed that in Lagos he must have become the crowned wit of some little set of dull men, the sort of Agreeable Rattle to whom his world looks to keep the ball rolling in some second-rate bar. One of his first strokes of vivacity at the meal was to put on

the look of a searcher for some missing thing—to peer round the table and into his tea-cup and say, 'Oh! I forgot. It's American soil. The stuff's prohibited.'

Billie squealed admiringly. 'Ow! Mrs. Aimes, isn't he dreadful?'

I could see nothing awry in Helen's smile at this burst of humour. The masks women wear beat belief. I suppose she was wailing inwardly. 'Oh! why didn't I think? Of course, he isn't a boy any longer, to like our old high-tea meal as he did. And I *might* have just managed a little quite cheap wine or beer.' But her smile was all right.

Three-quarter-way through the meal she offered him some of the cake that was to be light. 'I do hope,' she said, 'you won't find it too——'

'Half a mo,' Ted interrupted. He may have thought we had come to that point in a meal when the best people can't wait for a smoke till it ends. 'Cig., Billie?' he said, and threw her a flash cigarette-case.

Billie lit up, with an air of relief from the worst of the strain. Ted held out the case to his mother rather mockingly, as who should say, 'Of course *you* won't know what the right people do now.' Then he took a few puffs at his ease before asking her 'What was that you were saying?'

'Do you remember,' she said, 'the old cake—"Barn-brack" we called it—that we used to have? This is a sort of a try at it. Will you have some?'

Ted screwed his eyelids together and tightened his lips like a comedian acting the battered dyspeptic who eyes with disrelish and fear the frosted horrors of a wedding-cake. 'I think *not*, on the whole,' he pronounced with waggish solemnity. 'Not with a smoke, anyhow.'

Billie tittered once more. Helen didn't wince. No doubt

she feared that a wince from her might hurt him—might make him think that he had wounded her; so fanciful are the fond fears of mothers.

V

While the others sat out in the garden after the meal, I posted myself at an open window to work a gramophone that had been given to Helen last year. Till then she had scarcely noticed that there were such things. She had not had time. So it had come to her as a miracle, almost; while she had not been looking, means had been found to raise from the dead some of the things that Jack and she had heard together in transports of heaven-unveiling delight. She would be able now to give Ted his rights, or a shadow at least of the joy of hearing Bach and Beethoven, Schubert, and Mozart, Debussy and Brahms worthily played. Since the gramophone came she had been shearing and shearing again those short-fleeced sheep, her own personal expenses, in order to amass a small pile of records, each of them acquired in a fever of selective anxiety, with her fingers feeling the coins through the skin of her little bag purse.

Ted raised his jocular crow at sight of the thing. 'Ho, ho! A good old tootler! Now we shan't be long.' He rose, did a few dance steps not known to me, leered at Billie, and said to Helen, 'Well, *you're* going it, old thing.'

I put on a bit of the Kreutzer Sonata, and Ted was quite good for a time, but it was clear he had not much use for the stuff. Presently he began to tide over the boredom of listening by winking at Billie as boys do when they try to get some other boy into trouble in class. She was helpless at once. She tittered, or made a great show of choking a titter. She

said, with a giggle, 'Ow! Ted, you *are* funny.' She turned to Helen and said again, 'Isn't he dreadful?'—meaning—'What wit! What high spirits!'

On Helen's face was no signal of any mishap to her hopes. When Ted asked if she hadn't got anything 'just a little bit more up-to-date,' something 'with a bit of life in it,' she said with an equable smile, 'I'm afraid they are all pretty old things.'

'Well, sure,' said Ted, 'they *have* some pretty long white whiskers.'

He said it, not sourly, but forbearingly, as if nothing better than this poor entertainment could have been expected there by any man of the world. He wasn't subtle, poor Ted. You could see each feeling of his, each new stir in his little soul, as you see every move of a fish in a glass tank, every wave of its tail or flick of a fin. You saw him itch, almost to the scratching-point, with that old malady of spiritless youth, a shamed sense of the homeliness of its home. With Billie there he couldn't forgo all these winks and waggeries. She was the world, I suppose, and they were his way of washing his hands, in the world's sight, of any complicity in this stuffy old life of the cottage, its humdrum music and nursery meals and obsolete flowers—nothing up-to-date, nothing up to the mark.

But—could the world be failing him? Even while he was labouring most to clear himself, I fancied that Billie's attention was falling away from his face. And then I was sure. More and more it was fixing itself upon Helen. And no wonder, thought I. For since they had sat there the music on which so many of her memories clustered had had time to work upon Helen. Perhaps the very stress of her effort to master and conceal her pain had fired her like the strain that is said to

make an opaque metal luminous. For her beauty was undergoing the greatest of transfigurations, the one that comes when a fine spirit glows out through its physical envelope, disengages itself from the flesh and shines about the face in the way that suggested to art the first aureole. The white wreck watched her absorbedly.

I stuck to my job, and the 'Humoreske' of Dvořák trailed out its wistful streak of melody like a crooked smile playing over an old wizened face. 'It's sad-like, that bit,' Billie said when it stopped. Her eyes were still fastened on Helen. She spoke as if she had to say something or other—anything, just to make some sort of push to get nearer to that kind warmth which glowed out of Helen.

Ted hooted. Perhaps he was piqued to find Billie's eyes straying—she ought to keep better to heel. 'Sad!' he jeered. 'Sob stuff? That! Get away—he's out for the laugh every time.'

The pallid woman only looked at Helen. Helen had nodded to her and smiled. Helen always had the gift of making you feel that nothing you said seemed dull or foolish to her.

Ted drew away from them—rather disgusted, I think. He came over to me and opened out, without help from me, on his favourite theme—his tremendous career and his knack of coming out top in every conflict with man, beast, or circumstance. He said much about bachelor life, as lived by him and some Equatorial friends—'real he-men' he called them. They seemed to be more mannish than manly. Ted winked and leered a good deal in recording their feats. 'What else is a fellow to do?' he said once. 'We're sacked if we marry.'

I stared pretty hard, I suppose. 'Isn't that,' I said, 'rather a snag for you now?'

He grinned. 'You mean, about Billie? Oh! that's right as rain.'

Right? How? I wondered. Still, I left it at that. At last the flow of complacent autobiography slackened and stopped. He went to break in on what looked like a beginning of real talk between the two women. 'Well,' I heard him say loudly, 'Whisky and soda time, eh?'

Helen had nothing to offer. She owned it compunctiously.

'Oh! it's all right,' he said. 'Partner and self will take a wee turn down the road.' He turned to me. 'How far,' he enquired, 'to this burg of yours? Five-furlong work?'

Less, I assured him. Eight hundred yards to the first house of the village, the ancient Cherry Tree Inn.

He cheered up at that. 'Ho, ho!' he said, 'the Cherry Tree, the merry, merry Cherry Tree!' He gave a lurch of his head towards the village and said to me, 'Coming along?'

No, I had to stay and do one or two things. Well, he said, they'd be home with the milk, if not sooner: we mustn't stay up.

'You'll take care she doesn't catch cold, with this dew,' Helen said. She had brought out a white Shetland shawl, a cobwebby wisp of light warmth, and was laying it carefully round Billie's shoulders. Billie was watching her face all the time.

Ted was impatient till they had started.

VI

Helen and I sat in the garden silently, hearing the sound of the couple's feet diminishing along the road, till it was gone. And then we sat silent still. I wondered was Helen defying

me, in her heart, to say the least word against Ted. At last I said something quite idle and casual.

She didn't answer it. But it seemed to set free in her some impeded impulse to speak. 'Oh! the poor thing!' she said. 'The poor thing!'

'Poor?' I said vaguely. Was it of Ted that she spoke?

She went on. 'So battered and frightened and worn, so horribly hurt, for whole years and years! Like the poor pitiful horses that people call vicious because they've been beaten and kicked so long that they don't expect anything else and they put back their ears in their terror if you come near them.'

She paused a little, to go on, I suppose, with her own thoughts. And I with mine: mine were about the unaccountable ripening of the hearts of such creatures as Helen, the selfish and querulous girls that grow into women who from the infinite stores of their charity have something to give to the very serpent that tries to crawl into their Eden and destroy it.

Presently she spoke again, with a grave simplicity like a wise child's. 'You know Jack and I used to be mighty playgoers, till Ted was born. One play that we saw was about a French woman who tried to escape from the streets. A man was going to marry her and she was thinking that she could live bearably now. But then all the 'nice' women and men in the play set upon her and bullied and baited and jeered at her, like a poor animal tied up to be tortured. They drove her right out in the end, back to the streets and despair and disease and some early horrible death. We were expected to think it good fun. Jack and I looked at each other after it had ended. He whispered, "*You* wouldn't do that?" and I said, "Would *you*?" and he said, "Good God, no!" And now it has all come home to us.'

I didn't ask what she was going to do. I knew. Helen was not like the people who make out that life sets us tough moral puzzles to solve. She knew it was not piercing wits that we want, to live well, but plain courage.

'What a dew!' she said suddenly. 'Will you help me to bring in the chairs?' There are women who, in her place, would have said even that in the tragical key. But not Helen. Helen could rake out the ashes of every hope that she had ever lit and not give one whimper or sigh of self-pity.

She showed me the place in the parlour where each chair should go. The last to come in was to stand under a full book-shelf, a rude piece of amateur work, that hung from a nail in the wall. 'Those were Ted's books,' she said. 'When he was nearly sixteen he took a great liking to some of the poets—the modern ones—Yeats, Masefield, Brooke and the like. He saved up to buy them, and made that shelf for them. Then it all ended, somehow. He seemed to cease caring about them. They were left here when he went.'

I think I cared more about Ted at that moment than at any other before it or after. These handfuls of beautiful things collected almost secretly by boys who have since failed or died seem to take you, too late and most movingly, into the confidence of minds that may have been left too much to themselves when their chance and their danger came. 'Woe unto him that is alone when he falleth,' and these may have felt lonely, trying to grope their own way into the dim magnificent forests of letters and art. You can almost see them there, caught in the lustre and mists of their youth and drawn this way and that by the fortuitous pull of some impulse not of their own making or choosing. Could not you have helped them more, if you had only known, or had tried harder? But now it's all over; the children are dead or lost sight of; the

castles that they couldn't finish are mere sand again, like other sand.

I got Helen to play a new kind of Patience. We played the light out of the sky and then at a game's end we let the cards lie where they were and sat near the wide-open window, listening silently to the low breathing of the sylvan night, the multifarious murmur that is composed, I suppose, of countless light brushings of air past motionless leaves and the massed sum of all the infinitesimal rustlings of innumerable tiny creatures that are busy prosecuting their momentous plans to some vast issue of success or disaster.

Ten o'clock brought a break in this audible stillness—the first deep stroke of the hour from the church clock and, close upon that, the bang of a distant door, very peremptory and loud. I knew that expulsory slam of the Cherry Tree door—loud enough to assure the one village policeman, abed in his house up the street, that obedience to licensing laws is still the British publican's delight.

When the other nine strokes had boomed from the church, the silence seemed only the deeper for a while, till a rasping new sound scratched, as it were, the glossy surface of the night's silvery peace. It was a man's voice, I thought, but pitched rather high, as a man's sometimes is when he argues in the ' Don't you see, you silly idiot? ' vein. No other voice could be heard taking turns with this shrill disputant's, but there was a short break between each time he piped up and the next, as if somebody not heard by us were taking a terser part in a dialogue.

The voice was approaching. Articulate words might soon reach us. Already an alcoholic quality in the blustering snarl was as perceptible as a stink. In a minute or two I saw that Helen was holding her breath, to hear better. Then she let

her breath go, and it made a slight moan. Even I could tell in a few minutes more that the shrill scolder was Ted. By this time a word here and there was distinct. It was most often 'bloody.' After another few minutes a second voice came within hearing—a sort of stage whisper, low but clear and penetrating. The thing that I first heard it say was 'Well, I'm chucking it, and so that's that.'

It was Billie's voice, and if Ted's had changed, hers had changed too, but quite differently. I suppose they had had a few drinks and Ted was the worse for liquor and she the better. That which had made him drunk had made her bold: all the slavish terror, all the mincing copy-cat business were done with: she spoke like a woman who sets her own values on things and knows what she wants and will make for it straight across country with any amount of determination to spare.

Some bullying answer of Ted's could not be quite heard. Then she spoke again: 'Married! What's the good o' getting married, just to 'ide it. We'd be no better than what we are now.'

If the night had been quiet before, it seemed now to stand on tip-toe, with a hand to its ear. 'Who wanted,' Ted jeered, 'to get married? D'you think it was I?'

The woman's voice was not ruffled. 'I know as it was I,' she said. 'But—look 'ere, Ted—I 'adn't seen your Ma when I got on to you to marry me.'

'Lives a bit too plainly—eh?' Ted sneered. 'Not quite the pickings for Billie?'

The taunt drew no burst of rage from her—only a touch of good-humoured contempt, as if he amused her. 'Well, you *are* a bloody little rat, *you* are.' And then Billie set to and reasoned with him, in frank Cockney English, as you might try to reason the childish meanness out of some boy that you

don't want to give up as hopeless. 'See 'ere. I've changed me mind. Your Ma has gev me a square deal and all. Proper kind, she was, way she kissed me. Mind, I don't make no mistake. We ain't put it over on *her*. *She* knows the lot I am —knew it at sight—'ates the thought o' me. But she's played the game, an' she's kind, and I ain't givin' worse than I get. I'm lettin' 'er off.'

Ted almost shrieked 'And what about *me*?'

She laughed, without any bitterness that I could hear. 'You? Oh, you'll be all right. You take my advice. If you do want a wife to pass off on the coons as a keep, you go round to some parson and ask if he ain't got a cream-coloured daughter would do for the purpose. I'm off to me streets.'

VII

They were nearing the gate and said nothing more. I kept on looking away from Helen, and I was glad it was dark. It should always be dark when a mother is hearing a harlot try to put some decency into her son. I looked out of the window and straight down the little ash path to the gate till I saw the straight little figure of Billie, a black silhouette framed between the white posts. It was only then that I knew Helen had slipped quietly out of the room and the house, for I saw her walking down the little ash path in the dark, to meet Ted's paramour.

That light o' love did a good piece of acting. 'I'm quite awf'ly sorry, Mrs. Aimes'—she had put on the sort of 'Society' twang you hear on the stage, in place of her London street brogue—'but I'm obliged to break off this delightful visit. I've just heard—in the oddest way—that my aged mother is ill.'

I could see the two women's dark shapes approach one another and then become one, so I knew that Helen had for the second time taken the strange woman into her arms. Helen said, clear to hear, 'Won't you stay? I heard what you said on the road—I couldn't help it. I think you're the noblest woman I know. Won't you stay and let us try to help each other to get back a little of all that we've lost?'

Billie didn't act any more. She said quite simply, 'I could fair kneel to *you*. But it don't work. I've found out to-day. There ain't no going back, not in this cruel world. I must just go and get on with it.' As she choked the last flutter out of her newly fledged hope her voice had, to my ear, beauty and dignity.

Ted had lagged in the road, but he came stumbling up the steps to the gate as I came out of the house—for I felt that the last word had been said and the world might as well break in now on the poignant communion between those two generous and unhappy women.

Ted kept up the funny-man business as well as he could. He had worked himself up—I suppose while loitering in the road—to some muddled purpose or attitude. 'Say, you,' he babbled to me, 'Uncle B-b-bradshaw, when'sh 'ere comforable midnight train suit newly-married couple off f'r a honeymoon in Lonna-town?'

'You'll just go to bed,' Billie said, 'where you are, and be good.'

An up train does stop at Hallimore Junction, some eight miles away, at eleven twenty at night. It was ten-thirty now. My car could do it inside twenty minutes. I told Billie all this in reply to whispered questions from her.

Ted was bleating away about man leaving father and mother and cleaving unto his wife, but Billie led him away to their

room while I went back to the parlour. From there I could hear the bleat going on still, overhead. He must have been a good deal in her way while she re-packed in her box the things she had bought for her new birth into the world of all-rightness. At last the bleating ceased and I could hear only her steps. Probably he was asleep.

Helen joined me in the parlour, with all her calm gone. She was restless with misery, like a brave person who has to look on at a wreck or a murder he cannot prevent. I was sure it was all she could do to keep from running upstairs to entreat Billie once more to stay, wife or not—to let herself be delivered on any terms, from the foul abattoir that she was going back to. On the off chance of its helping to deaden present torment I set the music going again. Any music not sad would have seemed horrible then: some slight tranquillisation of sadness was all that could be hoped for Helen. So I picked out a bit of the Unfinished Symphony of Schubert—the bit that, as long as it lasts, seems to me to rekindle most surely the heart-rending sunshine of days that are long dead, their tenderness and grace and bloom. I knew she had heard it with Jack the last night before he went back to France to be killed.

When the thing was half through she sat down like one dreadfully tired. Then she leant forward, elbows on knees and her head on her hands, till that movement ended. I asked, should I put on the next one?

She didn't answer that, but she said, in a level voice, ' I was thinking of old times and all the music there used to be then, and of all the people who have died.'

Was Ted among them, I wondered—the Ted of her hopes and desires and endurances? But I thought that now I could safely leave her and go out to get the car ready.

In ten minutes more I was driving Billie along a shining

white road over a swell of chalk down, to her fate. The moon was rising, and she called it 'very prettee.' None of us ever saw her again.

VIII

Work took me abroad for a year after that incident, and summer was all aglow again when I returned. Among the letters awaiting me was one bearing the postmark of Lagos, but not addressed in Ted's hand. That looked bad.

The look of it did not deceive. The first words of the letter were the expected ones—'I deeply regret' and so on. The writer was the chaplain of a hospital on the coast. It seemed Ted had lost both his job and his health some months before.

'I saw him often,' the chaplain wrote, 'towards the end. He knew it was near. He spoke of you with affection and asked that news of his death might not be cabled to his mother, but given personally by you. He said, "Nobody else would hurt her so little as he." I asked if he wished to send any message to her. He thought for a time and then said, "Just that I'm sorry." He became incoherent soon after. At times he seemed to be repeating lines of poetry—modern, I think; I did not know any of them.'

I found Helen stooping over an oil cooking-stove that she had bought second-hand, two years before. She was taking out of the oven a round frame of tin with a brown dome, like the roof of a great bun, rising yeastily out of it.

'You'll stay to tea,' she said, with a face that was more than a year older now than when I had last seen it. But it was again eager and bright. 'I want you to try if this cake is really light. I've been practising it, for when Ted gets leave.'

I told her.

THE WISDOM OF MRS. TREVANNA

I

FOR thirty years I have lived out of the world. I mean the great world that keeps itself on the go and has fashions and 'movements' and things that 'everybody is doing' and faces that everybody is making. I am a game-keeper in Africa: not in the part where such a crowd of the 'best people' from England are squatting, to get away from the Reds and the Rads: I work more inland, nearer the Equator. It's very rural thereabouts, and the tsetse fly is king of the place; but England has now been given the job of swatting him, if she can, and running the show in his stead. And I am in England's pay. Some day we shall fall on that fly—as soon as we know what he most hates to be hit with. Meantime, I run down the fellows who kill too many elephants.

It's quite a good life for a hale man of fifty like me: all out of doors; walking all day through the wilds with your file of black porters; sleeping under the stars with a lion, perhaps, coughing confidentially in the jungle. Any boy would jump at it.

And yet it is work, in a way. You have to be wary with good old Nature: she bites. Miss your way to a well and you and your string of black boys may be dried meat surprisingly soon. Besides little famines blow all about Central Africa like the squalls on a sea. If you butt into one you'll be for it. So mind your Intelligence work. Then there's tact to be shown. Use a word in some playful, fanciful way and some sizeable king may think that you're just the rude sort of beast that would put the evil eye on his cattle: then you're booked, too. And all the time you mustn't let down the good name of the

whites. Of course our good name is a bit of a bluff, you may say. We're not the demigods the natives want to think us—not by a long chalk. Still, a lot hangs on our not being swine in their sight. And it isn't always so easy. There's plenty of prime stuff to steal, all over the place; and in some parts a chief who is putting you up for the night will offer you, last thing, the run of his wives.

You see the sort of life—all a muck of cause and effect, and all deuced simple and quick in the working; play the fool and you're starved; talk through your hat and you're knived; do yourself well, beyond reason, and somebody else is done in, if not you. It's like Judgment Day in full blast on the premises. I fear it gets you into a cramped way of talking—every word used with a literal, obvious meaning; no playful crying up of a thing unless you're game to go through with it. This may make you rather unfit for good talk among brilliant people; so much of their game is a starting of hares that they can't be bothered to hunt. So each time I come home on leave I fight more and more shy of the wits and good talkers. I can't keep it up on their lines. I bore them and they dazzle me, and I have to ask too many questions that they think ironic or somehow offensive, although I only just want to know.

So I go back more and more to the Alps when I am on leave. The good old peaks and passes don't do the brilliant nor put on fine manners. Give me mine ancient ice-axe, a pocketful of food, and a few rocks or a glacier to play with, and I shall be all right for the day.

II

That was how I came to be walking alone, one hot afternoon this last August, up the rough track from the village and

valley of Saas to the wee Weissmies Inn on the snow-line above. It's a four-hour walk, and the rise is some four thousand feet. The slope faces West and my rucksack was full. So I fried happily in my fat as I walked and thought how good it would all look about six o'clock, when I ought to be at the inn—the sun just dipping behind the Mischabel's high snows, the cool Saas valley darkening below, the glacier streams falling silent with frost and the air getting crackly with crispness; and then hot food and mulled red wine, and perhaps two or three decent strangers at table, men of the kind you do meet at such places, plain fellows that laugh at small jokes and will talk about routes and short cuts by the hour. I can get on with such men.

Half-way up, I was roused from these pleasant thoughts by the sight of some little flag of a thing, about half a mile further on. I made out with the glass a young woman's light skirt. At her side was a man in plus fours. They were not going strong.

I don't care to hustle past people. Still you couldn't walk more slowly than that pair. When I drew level each of them had taken a seat on a baking hot boulder. They seemed to be working each other up to despair of ever reaching the inn. The man was damning 'this bad eminence'—I think he meant the whole eastern wall of the valley. The girl was widening still further the scope of this malison. 'All mountains,' she shouted, 'are bloody.' She seemed to shout whatever she said, as it were in disdain of anything so pusillanimous as reticence.

Both were of the long, straight, loosely jointed English make—the well-to-do one. Both had a rather standardised sort of good looks. While the girl cursed the day she was born, she re-whitened, with a few broad flowing touches of a powder-puff, the sepulchre of a deceased complexion.

The man and I exchanged the straight-flung words and few that are prescribed by British custom in such places. At the end of this rite he asked, 'Is there any serious ground, sir, for believing that an inn was ever hoisted up this foul gradient?'

As a dull man I could only tell him that I had slept there last week and could now see the building. I felt that it was a witless and bald thing to say. Still, you can't get water to rise higher than its source.

They certainly looked as if I had committed a pretty bad gaff, calling for tact on their part. 'Well,' the man forbearingly said, 'as the House of Loretto sailed across seas I suppose a pub may go up a ladder.'

The girl had taken my offered Zeiss glass and was looking through it up-hill. Espying the inn she shouted, 'Built, I perceive, in the Street Lavatory style of architecture.' She still kept the glass to her eyes. 'The beastly thing,' she hallooed, 'seems to be real. Clothes-line and washing and all. Realistic, in fact—the landlady's undies are out in great force.' She dropped the glass and glared at the man and me as if these words ought to have told on us somehow or other.

The man, at any rate, exhibited no reaction to the stimulus. 'Real?' he grunted wearily. 'Of course it is. That's just the vice of this damn perpendicular Sahara. The mountains really go up; the sun is real hot; my feet are real sore. Jill, I tell thee flat I'm out of love with all these overdone realities. What I want is more unsubstantial reverie.'

'Well, you *are* a filthy disheartener, Jack,' bellowed Jill.

They smoked cheerlessly for some moments. Then the girl shouted to Jack, 'Say, you—are we to leave our old bones here, or a bit further on?'

Jack scarcely looked at her. 'Leave your prabbles,

'oman,' he said. Then he turned to me. 'You, sir,' he said with suavity, 'are a strong and determined man. Should you win to yonder height and find there a Mrs. Trevanna——'

'Trevanna!' I feared I must have bellowed like—well like a girl of the period. For I too have my Mrs. Trevanna.

'A lady,' he said, 'lightly stricken in years. Tell her, from her daughter and the least deserving of her friends, to bid the management not to wait dinner for us unless this can be done without injury to the food. One other word—tell her, if we should not turn up at all, that we died as we had lived, each true to his or her self and no other. Say——'

'Chuck it, Jack, before you make me vomit,' yelled the fair Jill.

For myself I felt that a little of Jack's persiflage would go quite a long way towards supplying my needs. Besides, I was doing no good where I was. The distinguished cross-chat of this couple would go all the better without me. So I waited no more than to give them the basic facts that the inn dined at seven, that all its staff were always snoring by nine and that it was still a good two-hour walk to the door. Then I stumped on up the track.

III

The shadows were fantastically long when I topped the last sharp rise to the inn and stood to take breath at that door. The sun was just dipping, according to programme, behind the white peak of the Balfrin, throwing out wild and rather sensational shafts of horizontal light. Romance, you know—beauty mixed with strangeness.

Joylessly eyeing this pomp, from four iron chairs on the inn's tiny terrace, were two men and two women. One man and one woman were quite young. The two others must have

been forty or so. All were legibly stamped upper middle-class English—the brainy variety, not the purely gold-digging sort, nor yet the horsy. I caught the characteristic intonation of Oxford, familiar in my youth.

This exquisite falsetto was still echoing pleasantly down the corridors of memory when there was granted to me a yet more agreeable resurrection of the past. Out of the inn door stepped, serenely genial as ever, only sunnily mellowed as with a fine autumn, the one, the authentic Mrs. Trevanna, mine and my friends', not seen for nearly thirty years.

As the young, ardent and beautiful wife of one of our dons at Skimmery, Mrs. Trevanna had elder-sistered us all when I was at that famous college. Unpriggishly, unprudishly, merciful to our absurd conceits and inflations, a tender solvent of shy petrifactions, a banisher of boyish glooms, a diviner and disengager of any high impulse concealed by the vapours of hobbledehoydom, Mrs. Trevanna had made us all talk, get it out, clear our breasts of the perilous stuff, while she listened with genius, the kindest of comrades, confessors and confidants. There must be middle-aged men all over the world who remember Mrs. Trevanna as the friend who helped them more than any other to get the full use of their own latent powers.

There's eloquence for you! But really, when one thinks of what that woman did for us—well, I suppose I mustn't begin all over again.

Her face had ripened rather than changed. Genial lines that used to come to it for a second or two, as occasional means of expression, had etched themselves lastingly now: her friendly life was printed upon her in those letters. Afterwards I half thought her voice was almost too perfect in its habitual use of certain tones of warming frankness. Some of the kind

heart's sudden improvisations, as they had seemed long ago, came almost wearily now. Can a divine benignness become too much of a custom? But I am a beast to say this.

True to the habits of the race, I betrayed the least that I could of my surprise and joy. Then I gave her my news of the two dawdlers soon to be involved in night.

'Ah!' she said lightly. 'My Jill, and Jack Poynder.' She turned to pass on the news to the four intellectuals on the terrace.

'Ho! Ho!' the younger man laughed. 'Jill cast away! And who said it was feeble to ride up the side of a mountain? Jill. Who asked should she order tea for us here? None other than Jill. Pride thy very name is Jill. And thy second name Jack.' That man made a flute of his voice—a rather high-pitched one. He played on it. And he was very blond and extremely pretty rather than handsome—you know how long some men will keep the looks of pretty boys. 'What shall we write on their gravestone?' he fluted.

'"We spurned God's gift of mules, and here we are"' was lazily suggested by the youngest woman. She was dark and must have been at least half Jewish. She had curly lips, curly contours of cheek, curly hair, a whole system of seductive curliness. The effect was enhanced by good work with the paint box.

'Why a gravestone at all?' the third woman said in a rather mincing and precisely chiselled voice. She was the forty-year-old. She was lean and precise, with black hair and black beady eyes that twinkled frostily when she spoke. 'Are there no Alpine robins to cover lost babes with leaves?'

'There spoke the Wicked Aunt,' the elder man cooed, and I guessed from this that the beady-eyed one was a younger sister of Mrs. Trevanna's. There was, indeed, a faint likeness

between them, but Mrs. Trevanna had all the milk and the marrow, the ruth and humaneness.

All this was wit, I assumed: wit or what does in its stead in places where some sort of vivacity, some little shake of the rattle or other, is *de rigueur*. Either way, I confess I was bored; it's only the natural sparkle I like in a wine. Besides, there was plenty to look at, just then, without listening to sallies. Mrs. Trevanna, for one thing. And also the going to bed of that sun. I can't describe such glories—won't try either: gush about sunsets and dawn is so rife that I guess wise people look the other way when they see a bit coming. The thing itself, though, bowled me over—knocked me dumb while it kept reeling off its film of miracles that melted into one another.

IV

When I could pay some attention again, I made out by degrees that I had butted in with my news in the midst of a grand palaver about frankness of speech, as these people called it. They had gone back to it now, hammer and tongs, with Mrs. Trevanna to act as a kind of informal Moderator of the Assembly. She did it mighty well; and I can't deny that, to my old-fashioned thinking, some moderating was wanted.

Miss Laura Sturt, the beady-eyed, was running, for all it was worth, if not more, the good old proposition that free speech should stick at nothing whatever. All reticence, she explained, was mere morbidity; no one who wasn't a primitive savage ought to taboo any topic; thoughts went bad if they were kept in dark holes in one's mind. Her voice grew sharper and sharper to match, as I took it, her growing sense of having got hold of the right end of the stick. 'We haven't the *right*,' she laid down, 'to shut out *any* side of life.'

'"Call nothing unclean or common"—eh?' Mrs. Trevanna pensively murmured.

I fear the friend of candour did not quite like this imputation of being in agreement with Scripture. '"That God hath made"?' she said rather loftily. 'Is that anything more than the old *lèse-majesté* business? Well, well,' she conceded indulgently, 'the Holy Ghost is welcome to his own sense of relative values. But what we've got to do is to stick fast to ours.'

'"This above all—to thine own self be true,"' the elder of the two men quoted, in a sort of demure purr. He had a merry eye, that fellow. It struck me that this must be his little joke—to tease the advanced Miss Sturt by quoting old tags out of the Bible and Shakespeare by way of hinting that she was not half so modern as she supposed.

She parried and lunged. 'Is that Shakespeare?' she asked. 'Please instruct me. I fear I'm not so well versed as you are in the primitives.'

This riposte had more effect than you might have expected from such simple fencing. All but Mrs. Trevanna rushed to wash their hands of any complicity in the old Shakespeare cult. With anxious speed they settled the hash of the poor Swan of Avon: why, he was as *vieux jeu* as Tennyson, Thackeray, Arnold—'whichever of them,' Mrs. Trevanna murmured benignly, 'was the goosiest goose on the green—and we poor Victorian villagers used to think that they too were swans.'

That set them off on the Victorians, mowing down the poor things. The idols of my youth were soon lying in long swathes. Austin Hood, the boyish blond, slew them by dozens and then Audrey Myers, the curvilinear Jewess, slew them by twenties. But it was she who gave the next turn to the debates

of this senate. When a spring tide of advancement has flowed up and up till it can flow up no more, the only advanced thing that is left for it to do is to ebb. I think that must have been Audrey's notion. When most of the tall figures embalmed in the *Dictionary of National Biography* had been heartily mauled, it was Audrey who first opened out on the clemency tack. 'I must admit,' she said, with a cool, complacent sort of slowness, 'the old Bard had a staggering trick, now and then, of reaching out about three centuries forward and catching almost the note of the best work of to-day. You should read, if you haven't, the little back-chat that Helena has with Parolles — in *All's Well*, you know. Diana Myrtle might have written it—in her *Ripe Medlars*, you know—the book the stupids sent her down from Girton for.'

I didn't take to that girl, Audrey Myers. There was a smear of lazy, tepid sensuality about her much-curved lips and dimples. Salome might have looked like her—not when strung up to dance but when basking on a flat roof in the sun, blinking down at the young men going by in the street, like some sleek Baudelairean cat, a creature exotic, chimaeric, alluring, a sphinx with some secret not fit to be printed. I didn't take to her the more for having once read the stuff she referred to—real stinking stuff with no quality but a stink—the kind of tap that the divinest genius ever born would turn on when he was dead out of form but remembered how well dirt will sell, any day. You know those croppers of old Shakespeare's? In my job one soon loses patience with that sort of playing with fire: that cause and effect are related is only too damnably clear, and the fire's a lot too hot to be played with.

Still, one can't go testifying. So I held my peace and stared

at the small rim of sun that was left, still throwing out a few fierce horizontal rays.

Miss Sturt, it appeared, was incommoded by this celestial pageant. 'I really can't stand,' she said, rubbing her eyes, 'this somewhat garish effulgence.' She rose and went into the inn.

Informally, the session stood adjourned. In a minute or two there was nobody left on the terrace but Mrs. Trevanna and I.

She took a good look at the crimson glow that was now dying down in the West. 'Do we all seem,' she said, 'very insensitive people?'

'You? No!' I said. Hadn't she taught me perception when I was a young lout rather proud of his own callowness? 'Your friends don't worship setting suns though, do they?'

'Does anyone,' she asked, 'in his own youth?—unless, of course, one is very uncommon.'

V

I put that in my pipe and smoked it awhile. I had time, having no change of clothes to get into. Well, these young things, I thought, seem to have a funny outfit of new gods. Could the gods that we had sworn by, thirty years ago, have ever seemed as funny to people thirty years older than I, with *their* fond recollections of mighty movements by which they too had been carried away in their youth?

Your youth has a way of returning upon you under some visual image or symbol—a scene, a typical moment of life as it used to be then, only quickened, intensified, doubly charged with meaning and with at least a semblance of beauty. Such

visions may drift in at any odd moment. One visited me then. A sense of all the height and heat of such enthusiasm as had animated me when I was twenty-one recurred to me suddenly as a picture of four or five men about my own age sitting out after dinner in the Trevannas' garden at Oxford and talking the June sun out of the sky: eager immature talk, much of it the joyous whoopings of young discoverers of delights that seemed wonderful then, though perhaps they were not quite new to the world—delight in Rossetti's haze of luxurious reverie, and in the cool pearly dews on Tennyson's bird-haunted lawns, and then the tonic thrill of standing, with all your wits braced and alive, under the stinging shower-bath of sparkling spray from Meredith's astringent wit. But when dusk had released mind and tongue from the last bonds of shyness, then it came out that what everyone there had hugged closest to heart all the time was a secret joy in old Browning's adjurations to men and women not to have a scrubby life of it, nor a mawkish one, nor a dirty. By some miracle we had for once been made unashamed of a private wish to live stoutly; and that dropping of masks had united us all, for the hour, in a kind of sacrament of confession—of mutual trust in each other not to misread or to sneer.

All of it came back to me so movingly now that I could see the solemn sky-line of the carved yew hedge in the Trevannas' garden, and two bats twirling about in the twilight, and Mrs. Trevanna sitting with the beauty of her face in dark shadow, though I could swear she was glad. For it was her work. She brought such moments to pass—disengaged the clogged spirit and called the waters from the rock.

VI

At dinner that night I must have been in the way, they made such a point of insisting that I wasn't. Still, they got through a fine lot of talk.

I'm oldish now but most of them were, in a way, much older than I, they had got past so many things, or seen through them, and they clearly had no use at all for most of the things that had always seemed biggest to me. They seemed to compete with one another in offering proofs that they never wondered at anything now, and never admired.

First it was public affairs, as they're called. One Sir Ludovic Sturt, a brother of Mrs. Trevanna's, had just taken a fall in a bye-election at home, and his other sister disclaimed, almost anxiously, any surprise or distress at this misadventure. 'Why *should* anyone vote Conservative now?' she asked. 'If we did ever get the past back, we'd be sick on the spot. I know Ludovic would. He'd simply loathe spacious days. As for rough island stories, he would as soon have horse-hair and mahogany come back to life.'

'You miss the point, Oh most Roman of sisters,' the elder man said. 'The choice wasn't between Ludovic and the future. It was between Ludovic and a Radical.'

'Small choice in rotten apples,' Laura retorted with spirit. 'Stick-in-the-mud wearing blue, or stick-in-the-mud wearing yellow. Who cares whether the patter is patter about Church and Empire, or patter about social ills and broad outlooks? The patter habit itself is what wants abolishing. Well, Austin, don't look so shocked.'

I was finding that each of them had a way of assuming that his or her last little bomb must have startled all hearers. But

Austin Hood was not shocked. None of them was, ever. Not to be shocked was, I made out, a sacred convention. Hood only wanted to slip in his own bit of phrasing: "Let's flog my dead horse," says Mr. Liberal. "No, let's all flog mine," says Mr. Tory.'

'Isn't that,' drawled the young idol-woman out of the East, 'why everybody's going Labour now? Labour *is* advanced, anyhow—silly, perhaps, but not bogged up to the axle in pre-war stupidities, like the others.'

'Of course,' said Miss Sturt. 'Who wants a cow that's still chewing the grass she was grazing before the War came and showed everything up?'

'That's where the Bolshevists score,' said Miss Myers. 'They do at least try to get some sort of move on. So do the Fascists. Both are advanced, in a way. No doubt they're a little wild-catty. Still, they do live in their own day and not Garibaldi's or Peter the Great's.'

There I had the temerity to butt in. From all that I've seen, while doing a bit of killing myself, in war and police work, I have contracted a notion that killing is cried up too much, as a means of getting things done as you want them. Somehow it doesn't deliver the goods as the fat men expect when they stand in front of good fires and say, 'You've only got to shove 'em up against a wall and shoot 'em—all the measly lot.' It's apt to get back on you too, in all sorts of queer ways. Mind, I don't say that all these kill-'em-quick Fascists and Bolshevists aren't nice, well-meaning men. But they're too sentimental for me. Too much gush about the moral beauty of doing in Tom, Dick and Harry at sight for not coming up to the mark in some way or other. Not practical, to my thinking. Not business.

I hoped I wouldn't be going too far in avowing this whim.

I tried to put it humbly. But that didn't save me. It was as if I had brawled in a church—knocked a bit off the altar. The pretty blond man piped up in protest till he was almost as shrill as a boy in a choir. 'Don't you think,' he squeaked at me austerely, 'we're prone to make far too much of a fetish of deferring, in the case of other people, the perfectly common experience of dying? I should have thought—please tell me if I'm wrong—that the noblest ages were those in which no man could feel sure, when he went out in the morning, that he would come home alive. And if for ourselves we seek the life perilous, why not for others? But of course I don't know.' In uttering the last three words his voice soared up into a positive treble of conscious rightness and unanswerableness.

I fear I have an unsociable habit of checking people's noble speeches by reference to my own narrow and unheroic experience. I practised this slavish trick now; and, for the life of me, I couldn't see that I did want my life to be more perilous. Lions, pythons, puff-adders, malaria, blackwater fever—these little bunkers seemed to me to suffice for the modest needs of my spiritual nature without any revival of the old propensity of the gallant Masai to knife you while you sleep. And of course the little risks of a life like mine are only more obvious and elementary, not greater, than those of living in Mayfair or Hampstead. But what's the use of incurring the scorn of people who have more spirit than oneself? So I lay low for the moment—and that means, in such cases, for ever.

In this ignoble evasion I was assisted by a new turn in the talk. The moment the nice fair youth knocked on the head my luckless fetish of unbloodthirstiness, the others seemed to scent the blood of idols in general and rushed forth to massacre, pell-mell, the false gods of the late nineteenth century. I always except Mrs. Trevanna. She merely brooded bene-

volently over this hurly-burly, ready to help out anyone who was stuck for a word, or was not getting an equitable share in the bloodshed, though all looked after themselves pretty well. In a general way her attitude was that of the master artist who just goes round from pupil to pupil in his studio, saying only 'Continue, my children,' and letting the quiet sunshine of his countenance fall upon their easels. The rest got to work on the *pogrom* as keenly as if all would be lost if a single golden calf were left on its feet by the time our simple meal of goat and marmot was ended.

To people more fully abreast of the times this slaughter might appear to be a mere re-slaying of the slain. When the elder man, Lisset, led off by downing the 'slave virtues of hard work and turning up for it in time,' I myself fancied that I had once read some gifted person's scathing exposure of these malpractices. But I live so much out of the world that, I must confess, I was stung by the indictment now. It made my face tingle to think what a point I had made, in all my long jungle treks, of coming on parade right up to time every morning and never taking a lift in a litter while my men walked. Base, it appeared, was the slave who did any such things.

I must have looked a little disconcerted at finding how far the march of mind had passed me by. For Mrs. Trevanna gave me first-aid in a good-humoured whisper: 'You mustn't mind Peter Lisset. Unpunctuality is his *métier*. It's in the family. One of his dear father's people came up just too late to sign Magna Charta.'

Mrs. Trevanna then took a very small hand of her own in the game. But the fetish she led to the block was only one which many old-fashioned persons like me have often thought quite fit to die. It was the mawkish cult of useless self-sacrifice—self-immolation for nothing, or for not enough—

the fault of the women of talent who throw up some great piece of work to keep house for rich, peevish parents who don't really need them. Mrs. Trevanna did not make the indictment wider than that. I fancy she shared a sneaking suspicion of mine that in most other acts of self-sacrifice there's something not quite definable on the good side; some elusive item of value comes into being; a mystic addition is made to the excellence of the world; its air is rendered finer.

I own I'm corrupt in this matter. I have been bribed. I once bathed, like a fool, in a river that I didn't know, and one of my black boys spotted a crocodile making up to me with intent, under the surface. That fellow took a short run and dived right into the crocodile's jaws before they could nip me. So I suppose I've been nobbled. I somehow can't quite see that black friend's action as a mere stupidity, or as veiled egoism or rank showing-off, or any other of the despicable elements into which any and every such form of devotion was swiftly cut up by our friends. But they all took a firm seat on my head. They queried my facts. Was I quite sure, they asked, that the man knew a crocodile when he saw one? Was I sure that a crocodile really was there? Was I sure the man wasn't a cinema fan? And so on until I felt as if we had all seen the little affair except me. At any rate what I said wasn't evidence.

It seemed there was some consolation for that. I wasn't the only bad witness. 'After all, what *is* evidence?' purred the voluptuous Audrey mellifluously. 'Just the mutual reaction, I suppose, of a personal temperament—the most changeful thing in the world—and of something unstable outside it—something we recklessly christen "the facts," as though they were fixed, whereas it's as likely as not that they have no existence but such as our highly temperamental senses confer on them.'

'What's Truth, in fact?' Mrs. Trevanna breathed softly, 'as poor Pilate asked.'

'Or truthfulness either?' cried Laura. With that she set about the 'old nursery fetish' of telling the truth though the sky fall—'or even the ceiling,' as she added smartly. Hadn't the Great War shown that that cock wouldn't fight? Had we not had to put all our truthfulness by in a drawer, with the red coats and the bear-skins, as soon as the real pinch came, and tell lies for all we were worth—in *communiqués*, in the press, in our propaganda all over the world—lie as spies do in any enemy country where nothing but lying will keep them alive for an hour?

Audrey was quite of that mind. It seemed she had been at school during the War. She described rather vividly, in her sensuous drawl, the elation of all the more bright-witted girls like herself when that old incubus of veracity was discredited. 'We lied and lied and lied,' she said with a sort of sleepy gusto. 'It felt like having a glorious new power. Some of the teachers got stuffy about it—I mean the old fossils. But all the younger ones understood.'

Mrs. Trevanna smiled. 'You must have been a thoroughly bad lot of girls,' she said, with no sting in her tone.

'Bad? Good?' Audrey derisively droned. 'Is anyone either?'

'Some eggs seem to be,' I said vulgarly.

The Oriental beauty half turned to me. 'Ah! *you* see the point,' she said with ironic approval. 'Yes, we can be good and bad, only as eggs are—poor things that didn't lay themselves, didn't addle themselves, didn't do anything but express their poor selves as well as they could. Who'd blame a bad egg?—send it to prison?—put it on six months' probation to see if it would be good and stop smelling?'

VII

While I was digesting this piece of moral philosophy weary voices and the squeal of heavily nailed mountain boots upon stone came into hearing outside and a loud knock on the inn door brought the landlady and her one red-armed waitress rushing out to offer welcome. Within another minute Jack and Jill tottered into the little dining-room where we were now at the stage of coffee, cognac and tobacco.

In slavish obedience to an outworn convention I rose to cede my chair to the exhausted Jill. Jack dropped into it promptly. The rest of our party stuck to their seats with true spontaneity—all except Mrs. Trevanna. That good-natured woman, I fancy, would not let me stand alone in an absurd solecism. So she gave up her own chair to Jill, who was most willing to have it. Thus was the fetish of politeness sent to its long home without even such drum-head court-martial as had been accorded to each fellow-fetish that had preceded it to the tumbril.

On some impulse that seemed to be general, the belated arrivers were now made the theme of a spirited impromptu burlesque of obsolete canons of propriety. The sport was to hint that, after this night excursion together, the two would have to be married in all haste, to preserve the lady's good name. The hints grew broader and broader, each free spirit capping the gallant candour of the last with some new feat of self-liberation from fig-leaves. When Mrs. Trevanna found some gentle means of suggesting the artistic value of a modicum of reserve, this polite comedy took a slightly different colour, and great play was made with witty allusions to such calls as a long day on foot in the open may make on the

delicacy—or, as Audrey would have it, the salutary frankness —of young man and maid. I can think of few sides of life—I mean few physical ones—that these brave spirits shut out during the next twenty minutes.

When the couple had stood this savoury fusillade for that long, and given about as good as they got, Jill Trevanna broke new ground by shouting across to Miss Sturt: 'By the way, I've lugged up your old beast of a book all the way. It weighed tons.'

The news seemed to burnish the little black beads in the lean lady's eyes. 'What!' she exclaimed. 'My dear Kitty Tressillian's *Superstition of Chastity*? You'll be rewarded in Heaven for this.'

Lisset looked arch. 'A somewhat—shall we say, a somewhat question-begging title?' he observed.

Miss Sturt glared upon him. 'Better read it for yourself,' she said. 'You'll soon find that Kitty is no question-beggar. I'd like to see the thing she won't face.'

I felt no such desire. But then I'm a man and no more. And the void where the desire ought to have been was not filled by what we heard about the fearless Kitty's book during the next quarter of an hour. We heard much. Audrey and Laura seemed to know the volume by heart. So did Austin the blond. I gathered that it was quite the big noise, for the time, among hard-riding followers of 'the advanced movement.' Laura said it was written in the true spirit of science—took the human subject right back to childhood—traced to the root, as she put it, the foul warp that many a young mind must take from the insensate efforts of parents to check its natural urge to put its fingers in the jam and its pure tongue in the pure treacle As Laura warmed to the work she went back further yet. She exposed the tangled web that is woven

round a helpless infant by uninstructed mothers and nurses when they subject its discharge of the simplest bodily functions to an arbitrary and archaic etiquette, inevitably shackling the seedling soul and clouding the dawn of personality. A bib, by itself, might wreck a whole life.

Those steely beads were brightening all the time in Laura's pioneer eyes as she breathed like an Angel of Death on the faces of the various forms of self-control that we learnt in our youth. They were all bad mistakes, it appeared. And not innocent, either. They were fetishes. And Miss Tressillian had found that they all took their rise from black conspiracies to bolster up some rotten institution or other—chiefly property and marriage. Property, it appeared, was bad enough. 'That much,' Miss Sturt said, with a fine gesture of dismissal, 'was acknowledged by all serious thinkers.' But marriage was the very devil. At any rate monogamy was.

That did surprise me at the moment. For I had always assumed, like an ignoramus, that the monogamisation of such a loose fish as man had been one of the biggest scores notched by women in all time. But Miss Sturt knew better. Wasn't she herself on the executive of the M.M.G. Guild (short for Marriage Must Go)? Away with the old 'holy state'—a phrase much quoted by Miss Sturt, and always in a tone so scathingly sarcastic that I felt I must have escaped a lot of infamous living when I remained a bachelor, although I didn't want to.

VIII

That was about the climax, I think. With what was left of their annihilatory fervour they mopped up a few minor virtues—honesty, equity, loyalty, shame and the like—that had escaped death during the first victorious advance

Fetishes all. There was a lot to be said on both sides, they agreed, about cheating at cards. Mere honour was the merest scutcheon. In fact, as Miss Myers comprehensively said, 'In these so-called times the whole morality stunt is getting somewhat excessively ga-ga.'

By now their voices were growing quite perceptibly sleepy. And I was to get up at two in the morning, to walk by myself up the delectable slopes of crisp snow to the top of the Fletschorn. So I slipped out of the abattoir, to make for my bed, just when things were beginning to look pretty black for the fetish of courage.

I found in the hall that Mrs. Trevanna had slipped out before me. She stood at the inn door, looking out at the moonlit magnificence of the heights. It was now perfectly still. The forces from which the world issued seemed to be resting.

She beckoned me out to the door. 'I hope you're not dreadfully bored,' she said, 'by this innocent little convention of having no innocence?'

'It's their having no youth,' I grunted, 'that makes me sorrier for 'em.'

'Of course,' she said, 'they aren't like the things they say. Who is? Were we, who said, "We fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep to wake"?'

Again I saw that Oxford garden. 'Oh! I suppose we were pretty tall prigs,' I said ruefully.

'No. We only followed a fashion. It was the way to talk then—to clap honour and duty and truth on the back, very hard. And now the way is to make them all stand on their heads. But it's all the same thing. It meets the same need.'

'You mean——?' I said, puzzling.

'It's good for them, somehow—just making the noises.

It helps. The way crying, in reason, is good for a baby. The way it helps some surgeon-men to say "Bless us!" and others to keep saying "Damn!" and "Oh! Hell!" all the time while they operate.'

'Then these young destructivists—operate?' I enquired.

'They are all working people,' said Mrs. Trevanna. 'Laura teaches at a school. Audrey only looks like Cleopatra: she's a rather efficient accountant. Jill researches in physics. Austin Hood is a hard-working tutor at Oxford; Jack Poynder a good actor slowly making his way; Peter Lisset a rich man who wears himself out on a prison-gate mission.'

'I beg their pardon, and yours,' I said. I was chewing a thought. Was it thus that Mrs. Trevanna had viewed the grand splutterings of my comrades and me in our youth? She had seemed to be with us so utterly! Had we been no more, in her sight, than a child whom any motherly woman must clap on the back to help him to cough up a crumb that has stuck?—we and our visions of the hero faces thronging through the cloud-rift!

'Of course,' she said softly, 'one mustn't expect what they say to be very wise.'

So ho! Had it been even so when we were confessing our towering aspirations and splendid resolves?

'There's this in it too,' said Mrs. Trevanna, 'You know how, as soon as you've said a thing rather—well, oversaid it, you know, as one does when one is tipsy with talking—a sort of reaction begins in your mind—a kind of an ebb-tide sets in—you draw back from that dear, silly high-water mark. One daren't say so at the time—one so hates to be ever seen taking in sail; so one does it in acts, on the quiet. That way one may really be helped to be wise by the rubbish one talks. And just now I do think it's best, on the whole, for young

people to get that sort of little rebound towards the simple old sanities—truth and hard work and self-mastery—all the fixed stars. You understand, don't you?'

I pondered. 'There's one thing,' I said, 'that I don't understand. When all we young duffers were all gassing about doing good and the Rabbi Ben Ezra and fighting breast-forward, and you listened kindly, what was it that we needed to be headed back from?'

'Well,' she said slowly and gently, 'all you dear boys might have jumped up and rushed away into the slums in a body, just to go up and down, doing good. And that's not a life for a man.'

I couldn't quite see her face. It was in a dark shadow again, as it had been in the garden at Oxford on that distant evening. But again I felt I could guess it — this time as a witty Madonna's, happy in having a sense of humour as well as her power to love, wise and tender to all her children, but not taken in by any of their little whoops and trumpetings, trumpet they this or trumpet they that, and whoop they never so bravely. It made me feel rather humble, and yet rather glad. So this was what it came to—the mighty swell of the heart in one's youth, the burst of dream and desire that seemed to have enough strength to break worlds. This was how it had looked, all the time, to the sane and humorous eyes of the Mother Nature that lived in Mrs. Trevanna. Well, so be it. Our high horses can't live for ever. And we must remember that things might be worse. What if the world contained little trumpeters only and none of the Mrs. Trevannas whose mercy endureth from generation to generation?

'But here I am,' she said, 'keeping you up. Don't forget the Séchéhaye stuff to put on your face in the morning. And now I must go and send them to bed.'

As I pulled off my boots in my attic I heard the door of the dining-room open again and a spate of voluble voices break forth. They all talked at once; but I dimly made out that they were all agreeing that passion was everything, and authority nothing, and that the life force must be given its rights.

Then I heard a gentle 'Hush!' from Mrs. Trevanna, and the whole din ceased at once and I could hear her saying mildly that no one must talk any more, as the house was asleep, and that they must all leave their windows wide open and not be afraid of the frost.

There was no sound after that.

DIDN'T TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF

I

I LIKED Jimmy Brinton at school. I don't swear I should have liked him quite as much if I had put my money on him every time he went in for one of the great prizes of this life—head of the School or a place in the Eight that rowed for it at Henley. For Jimmy was like certain horses: he had more of the runner-up habit than of the winning one. Before the Eight went into training, our last year at school, Jimmy was held to be dead sure to stroke it; and yet, when Henley came, he was only ninth man. We ran on the tow path together, alongside our crew in the final, and Jimmy was so taken up with roaring praises and encouragement at the man rowing stroke in his stead that he stumbled clean into the river at Fawley, much to the entertainment of the public.

We left school together, vowing on no account to lose sight of each other, as people do vow at such times. I scarcely saw him for the next five years. From school he went to the Bar as fast as the rules and time-tables allowed. This was not Jimmy's act really. It was his father's. All that Jimmy did was to be nice to his father. The father, you see, was one of those practical men who always know better. Nothing like the Bar, he said, for any fellow with brains; and nothing like starting as early as ever you can in the race of man's life. My own father, not being practical, differed. 'It isn't any good,' he said, 'in any sort of race, to try beating the pistol.' So I went to Oxford, to wait for the pistol.

I vote for my father's plan, every time. Most young men of spirit are mad, in some ways; and a University makes a quite

good padded room; by the time they go down they will have learnt, if they have any luck, that you can't ram and sink a brick wall with your forehead. Besides, there's a kind of informal Mop Fair, or hiring-fair, every summer at Oxford. Employers of labour drop in and look round, with the aid of wise Dons, for any young man, at the end of his time, who has gumption or guts or is fit to be left alone with a job. If they make such a find they fling themselves upon him and bind him to them with gold chains. Even a relative dud may get a good situation if he looks sharply about him and bears it in mind that the fair is soon over. In five years from the time I left school I had a job after my own heart at Leeds—such work as I should have done anyhow, just for the fun of it, if I had been a rich man; and yet I was well paid for doing it. By that time Jimmy had been sitting for a good two years in his chambers in the Temple, his wig nice and clean in its box, his gown all ready on a peg, his best *nisi prius* look on, waiting for someone to knock at the door and walk in with brief number one. Nothing like making a good early start? Oh! these practical men.

II

Mind, Jimmy himself told me nothing about these delays of the law. For all that he said, he might have been turning work away from the door every day, from sheer excess of it. For then he'd have said nothing, either. I merely gathered the facts from the atmosphere. They soaked into me.

It was on the first night of my first yearly holiday from my job. I was bound for the Alps, to climb there for a month, and was staying for one night in London before taking train for Elysium, from Victoria. So I went, after dinner, to look

Jimmy up in Vane Court, for I knew that he slept there as well as waited for the employment which came not.

Do you by chance know Vane Court, Middle Temple? Among the comeliest group of old dwelling-places in London, it is beauty's crown of beauty, at any rate on a long evening late in a glorious June, with the strong wine of your very conscious manhood's first holiday turning your head divinely. At Jimmy's high open window we sat out the twilight. A fountain plashed below in the court; beyond there were roses and lawns in a long-shadowed garden; a winning vista of terrace and stairway all done in white stone, drew the eye on to where barge after barge was sliding, with an air of infinite leisure, down the shining Thames. The dim sky-line of Surrey hills, pensive in mist; the sunken roar of the Strand singing bass to the Temple sparrows' wee treble; the evening peace of the old Inn, with daylight and lamplight sociably bedecking one another—is it only the life and joy in ourselves that make the passionate perfection of all these ravishing things, or is there anything left of them after we go?

I wondered. I sat, as it were, in a warm bath of poignant delight and luxurious sadness. And then, somehow, the fact about Jimmy soaked into me—do these warm baths, like others, open some sort of delicate pores in a man? I had not known before that Jimmy had failed. But I did know it then. I saw him as he was now likely to be, behind the screen of his courtesy—a being, perhaps, like the forsaken princess of the story, dying in her tower, all her life, of a starved heart and of missed self-completion, but always contained and not crying out. And then, somehow or other, I lost hold of that vision. My sympathy shallowed away. I saw my friend only as the untroubled figure which he chose to offer for public inspection. And so no doubt I grew wildly selfish again, and

fanfaronaded and whooped about my own joys, as a young man will do while the luck holds. He soars, he is a hawk, he trots the air, like the Dauphin on that horse of his.

Jimmy played up like an angel to my tempestuous satisfaction with life. He did not merely endure my esctasies. He made them his own; he carried them on; he glowed and exulted with me; he took up my rhapsodies, made better things of them, and then gave me them back, as if all the improvement were mine. I only remember one wisp of our talk. I think I had quoted, as thousands of people must do every year, when they feel chirpy, that purple patch out of the Bible, about stars singing together and sons of God shouting for joy.

He kindled at once. 'What a talent,' he said, 'the Holy Ghost had! What a writer! Of course he was at it a pretty long time—I mean writing the whole of the Bible—and roped in all the great wits—don't the critics say now?—of several ages to help him. Even so, what variety! Any Jack thing you may feel, in any old mood, he'll say it for you unimaginably well. Mystic and sceptic and fairy-tale-teller; moralist, legalist, amorist, pacifist, die-hard—all of 'em there: he takes turns in the parts. Don't you fancy we all come to read him in bed of a night as we grow up and find out for ourselves what's the best of light reading? He never can bore, in the mass: he has too many tones, semitones, overtones, every known means of tickling your mind into heeding him—everything that can "take you out of yourself," as a barmaid said to me once in praise of the works of the great Miss Corelli. And, taken in little doses, carefully chosen, can't he just cocker you up if you're not going strong, or soothe you when you're mellow, or—Oh? but what shall one say of his gift of mixed metaphor?'

Then and whenever he let his tongue go, it seemed as if you had said all the bright things yourself. 'That's *my* mind, uttering itself at last,' you felt and you glowed with a kind of complacency at your light touch and your critical sense and your flitting vivacity.

Only as I was going away did it strike me that every man, as Hamlet observed, hath business and desires, and that we two had been talking all night about mine, and not at all about Jimmy's. I lingered a little, smitten with shame and trying faintly to draw him on to his affairs. He dried up quietly at once, as if such a topic could interest nobody. So I said good-bye and then he seemed a little compunctious, as if he had been too snubbing before. With a smile that was extraordinarily kind and humble he gathered the triceps muscle of my arm into one of his big sensitive hands and slowly kneaded it in a friendly way that he had had with me at school.

'Come again,' he said, '*en route* to Paradise, or back from it.' And then, just as I looked back from a lower turn of the stairs and saw the big and square shoulders of Jimmy disappear through his door, there came to me one of those fugitive gleams of certitude which rest upon no evidence that you can specify at the time, and yet are so vividly real that you can only wonder whether truth has more means of presenting itself to our minds than we have yet been able to catalogue. Jimmy, I felt in that way, was going back into his chambers as into some sort of a Hell—not the red-hot fiery kind, with any amount of wicked good company on the grids, but some sort of cold, blank and vacuous Hell, such as solitary occupation of a burnt-out moon.

While the gleam lasted I vowed I would look Jimmy up on my way home from Switzerland. But gleams of that sort fade quickly; once I had got at the Alps, I soon lost my head in

the old delectable way—that of the lover alone with the beloved one at last. Home, work, friends—mere midges, all of them, for the time, spinning somewhere in the air outside. And then, at my holiday's end, the joy of work closed in on me again, like the clasping draw that sets in as soon as the heart has had enough of expanding. Gad! what health one had then! And health has a selfishness of its own, as the invalids have.

III

It was over a year before I descended again upon the capital and spent a whole hot August afternoon in restless felicity, walking to and fro between the shops of the men who sell foreign money, the men who sell folding lanterns for climbers, the men who sell jam in quarter-pound tins, and the festal hotel near Victoria Station, the blest birthplace of so many unforgettable holidays. But first I had made sure of Jimmy for dinner that evening.

Looking back now, I can see he had changed in the year. Not that he looked really battered or dusty. It was not so marked as all that. He looked—well, not quite the special and radiant opposite that he had always seemed to those things, with the liquid shine of his full brown eyes, the mobile glow of his cheeks and the natural lustre of his very dark auburn hair, which curled in a vigorous way, like that of classical statues and a few very strong men. But I didn't see that at the time. I suppose I wasn't out to see any such things. I was much too well off. I fancy the whole visible universe had to be, for me at that moment, one smiling landscape, with no figures in it more sombre than swains happy in their loves and cows satisfied with the pasture. All rivulets had to babble gaily and wittily.

Jimmy certainly fulfilled this last requirement like a master. He chimed in with my mood: he rejoiced with them that rejoice. Over our wine he plied me with an intoxicant much more delicious—a foretaste of the mountain joys that I was going to. 'Feel it already?' he asked. 'Dawn, and the cool of a wind lipping over a pass, and the bite of the blown grains of ice on your cheek?'

The feel of the things came to my face as he spoke of them. 'Gad!' I exclaimed. 'How you know!'

'I?' he said, as if that had nothing to do with it. But he went on. 'And the sun rising cold, from behind a black ridge —so cold you can stare at it straight—you can count all its cold yellow spikes if you like.'

You see how he spoke—with the bare phrasing of people who love a thing too much to talk slops about it. And I was in rapture, of course. Who wouldn't be, at having good incense burnt on the shrines of his particular gods? I sniffed up the smell of it, hard.

Others than Jimmy might have been decent enough about a friend's hobby. But you would have felt that they were indulgent, elder-brotherly, somehow superior. Jimmy talked as if he himself had never had any hobby but this. His colour rose and his eyes shone larger as he spoke about the illusion a huge dome of snow can give you—a sense of being cocked up on the actual spherical swell of the earth's globe—and of the other illusion you get there at night—the feel of the mighty swish of the earth as it goes whirling through space. To hear him was rousing, to me, beyond words. And yet it never felt as if Jimmy were saying anything very vivid or ingenious: it was only as if my own recollections were growing wonderfully fine—as if it were I who could talk with the tongues of men and of angels, if I liked, and call up old hours

of delight with one evocative word. But I did like the look of his eyes—full in themselves, but socketed deeply, so that the eager sympathy of the man gleamed almost mysteriously in their depths, like water shining far down in a well.

No doubt I only liked it then as a young egoist would, and took it as an extra glimmer of romantic lustre added to the pleasing landscape of my personal beatitude. Certainly it was not till long after our parting, that night, that the old question rose in my mind: had we spoken a word the whole time, about any concern or interest of Jimmy's? Where would he spend his own holiday? Would he be going alone? Why, I had not even thought of enquiring. Pretty sort of beast I must have been.

IV

My slight and passing compunction was revived the next winter by a letter from Mynors, of Durham, the third man with Jimmy and me, of an old school triumvirate somewhat the worse already for years and the cares of this world. Mynors wrote:

'Ever see Brinton? He's on my mind, off and on. He's a dead stickit lawyer, it seems—*tout ce qu'il y a de manqué*—devil a chance of a brief. I imagine he always hated the very thought of the law—longed to be an architect, I believe, but Pa Brinton was mad on the Bar. It was all that damned gentleman-instinct of Jimmy's that made him give in—his habit of throwing himself into everyone else's wishes and plans. Can't you see the whole thing—B *père* crying out for the Bar, and B *fils* afraid that even to mention his dear architecture would be like cutting in rudely when somebody was speaking? I guess Jimmy has some regrets that are pretty good gnawers.

'The worst of it is, the father's finances are reported groggy. It seems he had some kind of encumbered estate—ought to have sold long ago, but hung on. Pig-headed pride, I suppose —the usual thing. Anyhow, Jimmy's supplies are endangered.

'Of course, this is mere bazaar rumour. I have heard nothing from Jimmy himself. Nobody will. I see him the few times I'm in town, and I fish all I can, to find out how it goes. But he never lets on. He doesn't turn crusty, nor seem to elude: Only, after I've gone, I find we've talked all the time about Durham Cathedral or my craze for ski-ing.'

My own experience! Not next time though: I vowed I would take care of that. But there were no Alps for me the next year, nor even the next after that. Work kept me at home, with only short holidays at the Lakes, where God has made rocks fit for any archangel to scramble on, in his spare time. So I didn't go south, nor see Jimmy.

A third year passed before the notorious Brinton bankruptcy came and the learned judge laid the knout upon the back of Brinton *père* with the fine, free swinging action that you may remember. 'Men like you who feed their own personal vanity at the expense of society'—that sort of beans was what Pa Brinton got.

V

You know how you feel at such times. To write or not to write to the friend whose father has just had a whipping at the cart's tail, to the public delight?—that is the question. I didn't solve it. I only adjourned it, from day to day. I let the thing slide. Perhaps the world was too much with me. I had just married and settled down on the best site, as it seemed at the time, in the whole garden of Eden Few sounds

of distress could penetrate thither from the world of the unblest, outside. So two or three years slipped divinely away before time and place served and to go and rout out Jimmy became the obvious next thing to do.

He was in his old chambers, to my relief. I had feared lest that skinny war-horse, his income, might have been shot under him at the time of the paternal smash. But I only found one change in Jimmy besides a sort of new rectangularity in his broad shoulders and a grey hem fitted on to his very dark auburn hair. The strange thing was a touch of pride in his manner. It struck me like a sort of tiny notice board, with delicate but quite legible lettering on it, to say that Jimmy, too, had his privacies, like another, and any dog found in the preserved area might get himself shot. If Jimmy had been any common and unclean person, you might have thought his father had been made a peer.

Apart from that, he was eagerly friendly. He soon had me chattering. Where had my wife and I honeymooned?—that was one of his questions.

At Venice, I said.

'Venice, by Jove!' He lit up at once, as if no other place had been in his thoughts since our last meeting. 'All the morning in that little low-roofed church—St. George, is it?—on the Slavonic Quay, where the Carpaccios are? Sucking in that russet lustre of theirs at your eyes till your souls were as brown as ripe corn. And then luncheon and then a great swim at the Lido, and so back to Venice across the lagoon with the sun setting crimson behind the Euganean Hills—and they like black Pyramids standing against a dark flame? And dinner, near a tall door-window opening on the Grand Canal—and ripples lapping and plopping outside in the warm dusk, and pretty little silly songs about "Funiculi, funicula"

tinkling in from a gondola as it goes past, and both of you feeling "Life, life—this is life." Too wonderful ever to end!'

It wasn't just the words. Something else seemed to disengage itself from him—the breath of some passion that shed itself like a transfiguring atmosphere round those harvested pleasures of mine which he recalled. It made my own honeymoon more enchanting in recollection: the very Queen of the Adriatic became twice herself as I looked back at her now through this entrancing and enriching haze.

No wonder if it made me rather drunk. I suppose I rattled on about the joys of my commonplace travel, absurdly to my own contentment. Jimmy listened with positive genius. All he said was a stimulant word or two, now and again, to keep my tongue wagging happily, as a boy gives just a wee flick of his whip to keep his top going, when once it spins well.

Before I should have thought it possible, the flash sky-signs over the Surrey-side wharfs were winking at us across the black sheen of the Thames, though I had come before three o'clock on a fine day early in September. I looked at my watch. Already my train for the North called to me from St. Pancras. So now, it being too late, I remembered my vows to behave myself civilly. I was well ashamed of myself. I made some sort of stuttering show of asking how he had been, all this time. Had he been away for his holiday yet? And so on.

While I fumbled I caught that look on him again—very quick, very slight, and yet definite. It was as if Jimmy's dignity stood to attention, on guard, and yet not aggressively. But he wore the openest air of consent to report on himself—at some other time. 'Lots of things to talk over,' he said gaily, 'when you come this way again. Good-bye t'ye.'

Yes, he was unmistakably changing. There was nobody

now from whom the words ' Good-bye ' could come at once so affectionately and so terminatively, so warm with good will and yet so preventive of any answer except an instant farewell.

VI

Possibly I was chilled a little, unwittingly, by that first touch of a reticent frost in my friend. Or perhaps it was that for several years after that, time was flowing away, for me, as it does during a play that is good. As long as the children of two persons happily married are young and have health, the years are like one unending instant of deep satisfaction. To friends you may seem to grow older; not to yourself. You are safely through youth and all its restless vapours, self-pity and plaguing desires; and no sign has come yet that the musty old phrases about man's invariable consignment to dust will ever seriously apply to your own fine well-functioning person. Eight years must have passed like one good dream that fleeth, before I next heard of Jimmy.

It was, again, in a letter from Mynors. ' What news of old Brinton? ' he wrote. ' Mine is indirect only. You know that by trade I am what beautiful souls call, with proper disdain, a provincial attorney. So I have articled clerks; and articled clerks have exams to scrape through before our trade-union will let them put up their brass-plates. I share the joys and sorrows of my clerks, so far as they suffer me to, and lately I have made out that all articled clerkdom is ringing with praise of a London law tutor who coaches by letter, dirt cheap and with a demonic power of getting inside these lads' minds—even by post—and feeling about for whatever it is that stumps 'em, and putting it right.

' Well, this wonder worker is Brinton. I gather he took to

the job when his father went broke—partly to keep himself going, but chiefly to pay off the old ass's debts. The restitution stunt, you know—the Walter Scott touch: Jimmy gets that sort of notion; but coaching in elementary law can't be quite the same fun as writing *The Fair Maid of Perth.* Appalling drudgery! A modicum of it would keep him—you know the austere way he lives, and he never cared a cuss about money. But now he's out to get thousands, just to pour into this damn private well of family honour. So he turns himself into a sort of sweating factory, run single-handed—sixteen hours a day, so they say.'

While I read Mynor's letter I thought about dates. Yes, Jimmy's head must have been all a-buzz with this scheme on the day when we had met last and he had let the full jet of his imaginative sympathy play, hour after hour, on my holiday affairs, as if nothing else mattered to him in this world. He must have been in bewilderment, almost terror. Jimmy, the kind old conformer to everyone else's movements and wishes, invent a new calling! Jimmy face advertising himself, some way or other! Jimmy, the dear helpless failure in life, put a price on a talent of his, untried and lodged in him useless till then, and go forth to market it! As well might a shy country boy start for London, to open a new Stock Exchange. Well, I must run up and see him at once.

But you can't always get off at once. So I would go as soon as I could. And then the War came, and all our little arrangements were knocked on the head, more or less. Soon it was not of one friend of your youth, but of most of them, that you might have ugly news any time. I suppose it hardened us all, in a way.

VII

Half through the War I came home for a while with a wound. Before going back to the Low Country mud I ran across Mynors, now short of a leg and chucked out of the army and back at his trade—mainly, he told me, making out wills for second lieutenants. He had seen Jimmy. Jimmy, he said, had tried to enlist every few months, but had always been barred by the doctors: heart weak, they said. All Jimmy's pupils had gone to the wars; so his income was off; but he had got a labourer's job in some shell-making place—I think it was lifting great chunks of pig-iron all day. Each time he tried to enlist, after this, the faculty told him his heart was much worse.

He still slept at Vane Court, Mynors said. As hardly anyone slept in the Temple it looked specially lightless at night, as if it were darkened purposely. So enemy airmen thought it must be the War Office or Ministry of Munitions or some such choice mark, and Jimmy had had German bombs dropping all round his attic while he reposed after the toils of the day. But Mynors had found him convinced that many more bombs must surely be falling everywhere else.

Only one letter did I have from Jimmy during the whole of the War. It was early in April, 1918, just after we got the big knock from the Germans. I found Jimmy's letter waiting, along with another, the day the remaining three-tenths of my battalion were told that now they might lie down and sleep, at some ruined place near Amiens. For seven days and nights we had been hustled back, kicking the best we could, though poor was the best, and not resting at all, all the way from St. Quentin. Our Division had lost all its guns and none of us had so much as a rag of warm vanity left to wrap himself up in.

I believe every Jack man, as he hobbled away in the dark to his billet, was pretty well sick with the childish desire for a kind word from someone before he stretched down to sleep and got a night off from his misery.

My other letter was from a publicist of repute, a man noted for 'giving a backbone of vigorous and virile thought,' as his admirers would say, 'to the dull, puny, hand-to-mouth lives of average men.' This sage was virtuous. He wrote: 'What we have to do now, I suppose, is to achieve the right temper in presence of the accomplished fact of defeat. After all, it can be done. It has often been done. France had to do it in 1870.' That was the line of this wise friend of Job's—all was over, so we must make the right faces while Germany went on to give us a good running kick in the stomach.

Jimmy wrote: 'Oh, well done, you Fifth Army people. I swear you have Fritz tired. He's done—it's just the first battle of Ypres all over again—England within half an inch of her life, and the cord frayed most devilish thin and nothing left but the sort of pluck that will fight on without a blink of a hope to be seen. But I believe with all my soul you've done the miracle. You've worn 'em down, for all their strength. You know how the turn often comes—quite unbelievably, just when you're feeling dead-beat past caring what happens —how the storm unaccountably blows itself out and all the strain's suddenly gone and victory come. You're like that—somehow I know it.'

If you were ever a soldier you know how it makes your face sting with discomfort to hear the formal gush of civilians about your supposed martial virtues. They mean so well; they know so little; they miss the point by so much. And Jimmy hadn't spared the butter. Coming from anyone else it would have arrived in France rancid. And yet somehow to me

his letter, coming just when it did, was indescribably moving and heartening. One felt that somebody at least had understood; someone's heart and mind had been with us, all that hellish week. Squabbling politicians and commanders had somehow, between them, sent us to sea in a coffin-ship—undermanned, overloaded, unhelped. All our agony and bloody sweat had only just kept the rotten craft from foundering right out. None of us doubted that blame and shame would be heaped on us eagerly by the great and the wise whose muddles and jars we had just been expiating—more than half of us with our lives. But someone at least understood. Like whatever it is that takes wing from the wireless mast of a sinking ship and thrills out into letters and words that set men's hearts aflame, half an ocean away; so the bitterness of our deserted state and our long losing fight and the numbing and quelling brutality of our weariness had transmitted themselves to the distant mind of a friend and fired it with a pity as passionate as Christ's.

The help I got from that letter was positively physical. Everything hurt less, at once. Legs that had ached like bad teeth, just with fatigue, now lay quite easy on the stone floor of my billet. Soldiers, you know, do become like small children. They get back to very simple emotional states. When I had read Jimmy's letter two or three times I found myself giving a big sigh of contentment. I went straight off to sleep like a child who has had a bad day at odds with its whole nursery world, but comes round at last under a benedictive kiss, the last thing at night, from its mother: its universe has suddenly been reconstructed.

VIII

It was not merely Europe that had to be put together again in the first years of peace. Many minor Humpty Dumpties

had fallen off walls of their own. All sorts of solitary and insignificant men and women, the odds and ends of a complicated civilisation, had lost or broken their curious little appliances for hooking victuals into their reach and keeping up private beds of their own.

I gathered, indirectly, that Jimmy, for one, had the deuce of a fight to keep himself going till he could rally round him the unslaughtered remnant of his old *clientèle* of thick-headed articled clerks. As a lone wolf, he had no trade union to see to him. And he had no fat to live on till business revived: his father's famished creditors had had the lot as it grew. I wrote, a year after the Peace, to press him to stay for a while at our grey moorland cottage in the wind and heather of the West Riding. No good. 'Work that couldn't be left' was the reason he gave for his refusal. From some turn of a phrase I took it that this reason would last, though he didn't quite say he would never come to us. Somehow I felt sure—perhaps because he was so immeasurably far from hinting anything of the kind—that Jimmy was pretty well in the throes.

I heard from Mynors, the year after, that the old boy had scraped through—at a price. He had kept his fees down to the pre-war tariff, though living cost twice as much now. I think he must have had the born teacher's knack of laying his mind close alongside the weak, muddled mind of dull youth. Anyhow, custom returned in the end as flies do to first-rate sugar lavishly spilled. No doubt some of his pupils sneered at him for letting good stuff go so cheap—perhaps wondered what the catch was—had he been lagged for something, or was he just a fool, though a genius at coaching? Still, they grabbed at the good bargain: his fame in the under-world of the law was becoming greater than ever; he was a beneficent Peter,

holding the keys of a profession and not charging much at the gate.

'If Jimmy,' Mynors wrote, 'had a grain of the business man in him, he would have turned the thing into a huge cramming shop before now—big house in Kensington, lots of advertisement, thumping high fees, whole staff of the briefless to do all the coolie-work, Jimmy to count up the money. Not he, though. He's primitive—gives nothing less at a time than the whole of himself. It's that damned over-sympathy touch. He'll be used up in five years.'

The letter alarmed me. But my alarm was allayed by a rare windfall—a letter from Jimmy himself. It was cheerful, amusing, very friendly. He had never, he said at the end, paid his respects to my wife. 'You must make a break,' Jimmy wrote, 'in your very next *trajet* of this wicked city, from Euston to Victoria, and both of you dine with me at the Meurice. Seven-thirty, whatever the month and the day. I rely on your honour.'

I left it at that. The next year, in early July, my wife and I were at the rendezvous.

IX

Jimmy did us right well. The Meurice Restaurant is one of the places where many consciously rich people eat, lest they fail to shed enough money per meal; a little too Persian for me; but Jimmy, I fancy, had some simple notion about doing due honour to brides the first time they dine with you, and my wife and I had only been married for seventeen years.

It had been one of the hottest of midsummer days, and we dined at a great open window that looked down on a strip of public garden peopled with statues of successful men, and out across the river to its frayed southern fringe of old barges and

mud and squat wharfs, changeless in a changing London—still as picturesquely tattered and torn as it had been in our lost youth, for Jimmy and I were now old fellows of fifty.

It was midsummer London's best hour—the one when she softens her long, hot afternoon bawl into an animated murmur. The dim drone of the Strand had sunk lower since seven. Big Ben called eight o'clock in a voice that had grown strangely fresh and distinct. It was broad daylight still and the lamps coming out along the Embankment were no mere affairs of utility yet—only a string of gay decorations to lighten your heart, like the one star that blinked amidst the soft glow of late sunset over Charing Cross Station. Jocund little noises came up to our ears from loiterers in the garden. Perhaps you must be a provincial, like me, to know how happily London can stir you at times.

'London, London, our delight,
The City that awakes by night—'

My wife breathed the good lover-like lines of M. Le Gallienne with the fresh relish of one not surfeited with over-much of London or of poetry.

'Yes, yes,' Jimmy said, listening eagerly. His eyes shone; he seemed to take light at my wife's little spark of frank enjoyment. And then he slipped into a kind of quaint descant on the good old city's gift of rising to our occasions—of being all things to all men and helping them to feel their feelings right out and to push their thoughts through to the end, whatever they may be.

I wish I remembered his words. But perhaps it's better I shouldn't. Merely written, without the warm urgency of the voice and the look, they might give you none of the passionate sympathy that seemed to us both to burn in them

then. I can only recall a few scraps—visions or mere glimpses of London in this or that humour or mood that is not hers at all but merely her mirroring power of giving us back our own state of sadness or jollity, made twice itself; London deepening the sunny melancholy of the mind when an aureate autumn afternoon broods over the Strand—the motes of gold-dust afloat in the air, the tips of the two spires dreaming in haze, the hum of the traffic itself growing pensive, all the visible scene seeming to sink into reverie; and London at dusk on some winter Sunday, playing up to someone's mood of fine desolation—when snow has been falling all day, and the buses have given it up and gone home, and the muted streets begin looking queer—twice their usual width with the snow stretching level and same from façade to façade—and strange roofs that you hadn't noticed before give a kind of white cry to your eyes to look up, and anyone else that's left in the streets is a kind of brother-castaway and says good-night; and so on—heavenly and other visions tumbled out pell-mell, gift illustrations thrown off in a generous heat of invention, to add weight and charm to the light words of a friend.

We sat a long time at our coffee and smoked. The lamps twinkled brighter and brighter among the still leaves of the planes on the Embankment. Whispers and laughter, emboldened by the warm darkness, rose from the garden walks like a gay fume. The whole air was vivacious—rich with the immemorial odour of life and murmurous with its intimate promptings to dream and desire. And life seemed simple, too. You know how it can fluster you sometimes, like several people shouting at you, at once, all sorts of different things. There was no clamour now: you might fancy the whole world had said 'Hush' and taken a deep breath and that now whatever it wanted to say was coming out of its

lips, all clear and liquid and pearly. 'Love everything, take everything on trust, write nothing off as hopelessly bad'—that was the gist of it. Whatever might have seemed to me ugly or vile was transmuting itself for the hour into the touching littleness of the offences of children, their little grabbings and rows and the grand mess they make of the lawn and the beds in trying to work out their vast thoughts and prescient plans. Good moments! We live for them, in a way—the strange fire lit in the blood, and the release from our own everyday dulness. Up and up shoots the tremulous flame of our new insight till there appears to be no pitch of ecstatic lucidity that we may not ascend to. And then, of course, vision fails; the flame burns itself out; the flush vanishes from the high snows; we are shut in again, and blear-eyed. But we know, every time, that we have not been deceived: we *were* nearer to life's glowing heart: doors *were* opening.

I fancy some people—poets, painters, all sorts of artists—must know how to bring on this state of the mind or the soul, or whatever it is, in themselves when they choose—anyhow, pretty often. Jimmy wasn't an artist. His father had smothered all that. But it was always in talk with Jimmy that those divine moments came to me best, brought the most piercing light and stayed longest. To be with a friend seemed to awake in him some dormant power of seeing to perfection whatever his friend might try or desire to see—of seeing it dressed in all its possible interest and beauty and wonder, merely for him to place at this friend's disposal. When he was moved in that way a virtue of some sort went out of him into your mind: you were inspirited and empowered: you 'had a devil' of a magnificent and transfiguring kind. However much Jimmy had failed for himself, in the ways of the world, he carried about him this magical lamp for the use

of his friends: he had the key, for them, to the only genuine garden of enchantment.

x

Not that I saw it all then. But my wife did. My wife has twice my perception. 'You never told me,' she said in the taxi on the way back to our hotel, 'how uncommon your friend is. Why, his kind are the pick of the earth—the only true salt—the ones who can only be all that it's in them to be by putting themselves in the place of somebody else. Then they're all air and fire and force till they have to sink back again into themselves. Oh! why didn't somebody marry him?'

She lapsed into thought, and I knew she was mentally reviewing the ranks of possible mates and protectresses for a defenceless specimen of selflessness. Then she pressed my arm suddenly, just as if she had espied something disquieting. 'What,' she said quickly, 'is he doing now? They're not safe, those dear things. The light goes out and they're all alone in the dark. It's not safe.'

When she said it, I saw, all at once, what Jimmy's nocturnal return to the echoing emptiness of the Temple must be, after one of these great outflows of his genius for good comradeship. I could hear now his solitary footsteps ringing loud along the flags of Middle Temple Lane and up the creaking stairs, back to the room where he had sat out, in failure and drudgery, all the prime of his life. 'Oh! I have ta'en too little thought of this'—I felt like Old Lear when he suddenly and belatedly saw how much more is suffered by other people than he had ever known.

I saw it now with a poignant clearness—almost heard it like the voice of a creature crying out to be helped. It was as if I felt sure, though I couldn't tell why, that someone was

bleeding to death alone and stoically, on the other side of a wall.

At the hotel door, when we stood in the light, I looked at my wife, without speaking. Her thoughts must have been going along the same road as mine. For she said at once: 'Yes, dear, go quickly. It might be too late.'

I re-entered the taxi and drove to the Temple.

XI

The cloistral place had barred in by that time its night population of ghosts of old lawyers, and lean mice, and a few living hermits. But I prevailed with the porter at the great gate. Inside, as the gate clanged behind me, the hollow resonance of my feet on the stones made me nervous. I tried to walk more softly, as if the resident apparitions might be disturbed if I didn't. I almost slunk down the lane to Vane Court, and got more and more on my toes as I ran up the worn wooden stairs, shamed all the time by some unaccountable consciousness of prying: I found I was dodging from shadow to shadow at the landings, where the tall windows were.

Good! Jimmy's 'oak,' or outer door, stood half-open. A dim shaft of light shone through it aslant, for an inner door, the sitting-room one, was half-open too. Both looked as if someone had rushed through them regardless, bent wholly on something within.

I rapped the great oak, got no answer and went on, a couple of steps, to knock on the light door beyond.

A voice strangely remote, reckless and casual, not Jimmy's voice and yet oddly related to Jimmy's, came from within: 'Knock, knock, knock! Oh! come along in, a' God's name.'

I obeyed.

Jimmy still had his hat and his overcoat on, for all the night's heat. He was sitting, his back to me and his face to the fireless grate at the room's further end. He was leaning well back, with his right arm out at full stretch across the arm of the chair, holding a square whisky bottle by its short neck. On the table there lay a wet cork, still impaled on a corkscrew: also a white cap of tin-foil, the maiden snood of such bottles. No glass was in sight and no water. About a third of the whisky was gone, though only a bare twenty minutes had passed since we had bidden Jimmy good-night. He had wasted no time.

I couldn't tell whether he knew I was there. I thought not. He didn't turn or speak. He was shut up, I fancied, in some intense state of himself, some passionate absorption—perhaps a heavenly sense of rest in a refuge from unendurable thoughts.

For a minute, perhaps, I stood gazing. From second to second I clung on to the safety, the relative safety, that there is in not having yet made an unescapable choice between two irreparable lines of action. While I stared and hung back, Jimmy gave a great start and said to himself: 'My God! no!' as sleepers cry out at some turn in a dream: and then the stuff went up to his mouth; I could hear the glass knock on his teeth, and he took a great pull, only checking a second or so at a time to let the air jostle and gurgle its way past his lips into the emptying bottle.

I am a well enough seasoned vessel, but such a drink would have choked me with coughing. Jimmy only gave such a sigh of relief as I have heard a half-flayed soldier breathe when the surgeon's emollient picric acid flowed over the burns. He let his head go further back and gazed up at the shabby rows of worn text-books of law, and the old school rowing prizes shelved above them—lidded flagons of mist-coloured pewter

lettered with the names of many companions in the untainted victories of youth. Heaven knows what his look was like; dreamy, I hoped; his mind might be back now in those unreconstructible days.

Was I right to do what I did? At the moment it felt like the one decent course—to steal out of the room on my toes, and right out of the Temple, and leave him all that I could of his privacy and his pride. He might be in Paradise now, for an hour or two, whatever the terms of his admission to that brief felicity. And if he should see me, who knows? He might never have spoken to me again.

Yet I knew that a chance had been missed. I had tripped over a secret that he would never tell me now: as soon would he have spat on my wife's drawing-room carpet as bore a friend—so he would regard it—with any trouble or peril of his. And I had sown seeds of possible estrangement between us. I knew the cold mists that can rise from things known, but never to be mentioned, between friend and friend. But the choice had had to be made. Who can be wise and humane, resolute and prudent, all in a moment?

XII

Early in the winter that followed I heard from Mynors—what I expected.

'I am afraid,' Mynors wrote, 'our old Jimmy is beaten. His laundress asked me to come—said he could hardly stand up, but was trying to work all the time. When I got there, his face had the look—you know?—that makes you feel "Little for death to change here." He's unbelievably wasted. I 'phoned and a doctor came in ten minutes. You could see him put on the black cap, at the door, though he spoke as they do—

" with good air and good nursing " . . . etc. We've got him into an airy hospital on the heights, north of London. If you want to see him, come soon.'

I reached the place next morning. They call it the Hospital of St. Catherine of Siena, the saint that had beautiful manners. It wasn't visiting time, but they let me in at once when they heard which patient I wanted. I knew what that meant and also why I was warned by the Sister in charge, ' I'm afraid you'll find him very ill,' she said, with an unjaded kindness worthy of her Saint, as if she had never before had a man come to see a friend die. From the door of the ward I could see directly which was his bed. It had round it the screens they put up lest the rest of a ward see the ultimate pangs.

I once thought I had seen in war all the worst shows of death—every shadow, cruelly grotesque or starkly horrible, that the one angel whom all of us are sure to entertain can throw down upon a face before actually alighting upon it. But I had been mistaken. I had not known how gaunt and waxen a corpse, with the skin strained incredibly tight over cheek-bone and jaw, could still have an audible voice, and eyes able to grow heart-rendingly bright at the sight of a friend.

In greeting people whom he liked, Jimmy had always had a characteristic gesture, a forward reaching impulse of the shoulders, quite different from a bow. You know how a warm-hearted dog will wag its whole self, and not its tail only, at sight of an ally. The thing had been akin to that. Mantling with pleasure, the good will in Jimmy's friendly interior had animated some corresponding movement of the body, as if trying to project itself towards the person he was glad to see. Over his emaciated shoulders there passed now a shadowy semblance to that friend-ward craning of the heart.

I drew nearer to him, in some unmeditated movement of

response. But the faintly raised skeleton of a hand warned me away. 'Tuberculosis,' he said. 'Mustn't come within range.' He smiled. 'Senile tuberculosis—at fifty! D'you think it too pushing?'

He knew how it stood. He spoke like a man with affairs to wind up and debts to discharge. The earnest way he thanked me first 'for having come to see him so often' almost bowled me over, to start with—me, the lifelong deserter of this fond thanksgiver, for years at a time! And then I could see he collected himself for an effort. He laid on my coat sleeve a hand that seemed as light as a singing-bird's claw: 'I was afraid,' he said, 'I had used up your patience—that night at my chambers—the time I didn't turn round. You remember?

I suppose I assented somehow.

'I cut you,' he said. 'Unthinkable action! I saw you in my little shaving glass that I'd hung on the wall, and I didn't turn round. And no excuse either, except—just that I wasn't there. See? I've had two worlds to live in for—oh! I can't remember how long, and I'd just gone away to the other. Can you imagine?'

'Yes, yes,' I said eagerly.

'Oh! good!' he said, in a deep sigh of relief, as if that moment of direct self-explanation had taxed his endurance. He spoke lightly now, like a man gladly passing to some impersonal topic. 'The Temple's a great place at night. It's not simply empty. A brand new house could be empty. The Temple's super-empty with five hundred years of having been emptied and emptied of youth and then emptied of it again. A place can't remain just the same after so many warm-blooded creatures have got themselves caught in it young, and have lost heart and dried up, by degrees, each of 'em in his own cell, very private and decent; and then they're dusted away

like dead flies, for all the passionate hearts they had once. Such a place has to become like an old fiddle that's saturated with all the old music that ever was made on it—reeking with beauty and pain, love and loneliness and regret—the *lacrimae rerum*—you know the old tag. I knew—just by sight—a poor devil or two that lived there alone—cranks, I suppose, or rejects—fellows who had the game lost from the very first ball. I used to see 'em crawling in and out in the day-time. I suppose they were trying to look like anyone else. But nobody saw them at night. They must have just shut the door and sat quiet and heard the trees rustle. You know how those trees stand about in the Temple; you'd think they get nervous at night—the boughs huddle together and shudder although there isn't a wind, and then the men that have failed sit and shiver and know that they're done for. I guess they lose hold now and then, the way the beasts do in the Zoo—give way and blubber to themselves like children: '*Why*, mayn't I start all over again? Why *should* it be only one try, and then everything over?'

His voice was weakening, but a spark had flickered up into flame in his eye and his waxen face was flushed with compassion as I knew that it could not have been if he had known he was pleading his own pitiful case as well as that of those brother unfortunates. I believe he had clean forgotten himself; he was using up his remnant of life in the last of his many efforts of passionate sympathy.

'That's why they drink,' he said simply. 'You see, it's the nearest they'll ever get now to any of the things that they've missed—distinction, adventure, discovery, conquest, fatherhood—all the big things. "Cup us till the world go round," you know—till everything runs clear and everyone you could dislike is unmasked and turns out a good fellow, the way people

do when they're dead. And depth after depth of truth opening out, and everything slipping into its own perfect place, and the whole world astir with a sort of vast mystical rightness that knows how to use everything—everything good and everything bad, just the same—to push on with some one magnificent purpose. The trees themselves come all right then; they stop peering and nudging each other. All rubbish, you think?' He spoke almost entreatingly. He was terribly tired.

'No, no,' I warmly assured him. Just didn't I know how delusion and vision are tangled together in that half-understood commotion of mind and heart, so that a Burns or a Mangan may just catch a glimpse, as he sinks through the pit infernal, of unities, coherences and charities that are hidden from my sober sight!

The Sister moved a screen a little, and looked in on us. 'I'm afraid,' she said to me, with a courtesy almost tender, 'you ought——'

I nodded, and then she left us alone for our last minutes.

'I'm forgiven, then?' Jimmy said, looking up eagerly.

I stooped to embrace him. But his care for me was quicker than my grief and affection. He put his hand over his mouth. 'Not for want of love,' he murmured. His voice was worn almost to nothing.

I kissed the hand and went out, unable to answer.

XIII

Mynors and I found little to do as Jimmy's executors. He came almost as near as man can in these days to fulfilling the old saying, 'Naked came I into the world, and naked go I out of it.' His ant-like labours had just paid off the last of his patrimony of debts before the War came to upset his finances and Europe's.

He left us his few books—mainly the bigger Latins and Greek, and Montaigne and Molière, and Cervantes, and three or four English poets: he hadn't read widely but did read some lovable writers a great many times, so that they got built into his mind and shone out now and then through his talk, as you may have noticed. On one shelf, however, I found what might well be the darling of a collector. It was a scarce, rather exquisite anthology of Greek love lyrics, delicately bound. My name and the date of my marriage were on the title-page, in Jimmy's hand, and also a couplet of Greek elegiacs conveying Jimmy's old liking for me and his hope that this small sheaf of songs about love and delight might not come amiss in the 'honey-sweet month'—all wittily worked into twelve burnished words of the old gem-cutting scholarship, now so much out of fashion.

I easily saw why that wedding present had never been given. Misgiving would have been certain to seize on Jimmy, when he had fashioned that graceful jet of affection, lest he should be 'showing off' if he sent it. For he had always been almost fantastically far away from the happy state of those who feel that the world can never be offered enough of their own fine personalities. Jimmy's impulse was rather to be to a friend what a bright fire is, or a very good chair, something which puts you at ease and may help you to be at your best and to shine, but vaunteth not itself and seeketh not its own.

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